Blue River

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I put Bay Rum in an empty eye drop container, half an ounce, enough for the two-week trip I was taking with my wife. I marked the bottle with a big B to distinguish it from the bottle of eye wash that was really eye wash. I showed it to my wife. That’s clever, she said.

It was among the jumble of my stuff on the hotel sink. Somehow, she forgot, or maybe wanted to forget, that it wasn’t eye drops, that it was marked with a B. She has many physical afflictions and likes to wallow in them, likes to wring all the sympathy she can from them. She gets me to do things for her out of consideration for her suffering.

The Marlboro Man is no pussy, no metrosexual who lubes himself up with mousse and psychotherapy, who obsesses about what his mother did to him and what his father didn’t. The Marlboro Man might feel like shit all the time, but that’s the booze and the women, the ex’s and nex’s, the bad news coming down the pike.

She put the Bay Rum, R, in her right eye, just a drop, but enough to hurt like hell. Her cornea turned from brown to blue. No harm there, said the ophthalmologist, but my wife disagreed.

A cactus doesn’t feel great either, standing in the middle of the desert with his shoulders frozen in a shrug, arms outstretched in a way that means: Look, I did the best I can. Sure, I made mistakes, like with that bay rum, R, but I couldn’t do no better.

The woman with the cruel face and large breasts rests on the couch under the Jaguar, her legs folded under her, and talks on a cell phone, the universal currency of disengagement and contempt. The doors into the room are ten feet tall, but she is
only five, the same height as her ancestors, who
died before they were forty and whose foreheads
were flat, and their eyes crossed. This woman's
face is rich in cruelty, as if cruelty came in batches
of a million pixels. Her cell phone and blouse
are lurid pink, her toenails are orange. She is a
minor character in a detective novel featuring the
Marlboro Man, who hides a shiv in her ratted hair.

6.

The Marlboro Man doesn’t even smoke anymore.
He quit after one of his lungs shriveled up and
drew on the road, looking like a charred
marshmallow. His cow dog stopped to sniff it, then
moved on, gave it less attention than a dried turd.

7.

Jaguar Woman studies the screen of her cell phone
like a Sephardic rabbi studying the Torah. She
studies it like a weatherman, surveying swirls of
radar for deadly storms, like a mother staring into
her baby’s crib for signs of polio or sudden death
syndrome, like the father of a juvenile delinquent
peering into his son’s face for proof of worth or
worthlessness. Her face gets more cruel as I watch,
until she forces me to orgasm without touching
me, then leaves me to recover my sanity, and to
clean myself. She goes back to the couch, back
to uninterrupted staring into her cell phone, like
a Sicilian studying the face of a pizza for signs of
crime or the dark, mottled face of his lover for signs
of betrayal.

8.

The Marlboro Man hates being called The
Marlboro Man. That’s bullshit, he says. He rides
down into the wash looking for a lost calf or a good
place to kill himself.
Gabriel Fischer was sitting cross-legged on a barstool in the kitchen, clutching a napkin and drinking orange juice, when his uncle waltzed in with an empty plastic water jug and a paper bag full of dry ice.

“Buenos días,” declared Roger. “Beautiful day for bomb making.” He took off his Stetson and set it, along with his supplies, on the counter, revealing a coarse mane of black hair shot with gray.

Gabriel lacked Roger’s insatiable appetite for destruction; his happy ambition to start each day by blowing something up. He got more pleasure out of gathering eggs from the chicken coop every morning, even though it meant dodging droppings on his way in and out of the pen. But he didn’t want to rain on Roger’s parade by refusing to participate. His uncle had been generous enough, after all, to fly him out to his ranch in Colorado as reward for completing his seventh-grade year with high marks. And Gabriel would be lying if he said he didn’t get some sort of kick out of detonating a dry ice bomb. It was the kind of reckless recreation for which his parents back home would ground him forever, that is, if Berkeley Police didn’t arrest him on the spot.

“I’m game,” he said.

Still, there were other things he’d rather do that morning, aside from collecting eggs. Like learn how to shoot the fancy-looking pistol Roger had all of a sudden begun carrying around. It hung inside a ragged leather holster at his waist, with its mother-of-pearl grip jutting out like an iridescent tooth. Gabriel eyed it as Roger yanked a thick wool glove out of the back pocket of his Levi’s.

The first time Gabriel had ever seen the gun had been the night before, when he’d gone upstairs to floss, after he and Roger had eaten gristly rib-eye steaks off TV trays and watched Clint Eastwood in Dirty Harry, a movie Gabriel’s mother, Ellen, had once denounced as “misogynistic,” whatever the heck that meant. It was the first gun he’d ever seen in real life. His friends from Willard Middle all owned pellet rifles, but because Gabriel’s parents disapproved of weapons of any sort, he was forbidden from going out on the weekly hunts in Ron Yarbrough’s backyard. Gabriel’s parents’
pacifism made him a coward in the eyes of Ron and the rest, whose folks seemingly had no qualms with their sons taking deadly aim at crows and squirrels. Gabriel didn’t want to kill any animals—in fact, the whole thing sounded pretty horrible—but he wanted the acceptance of the group, the camaraderie of the coolest guys in school. And he knew when he saw the pistol, from the end of the hall, on the dresser in Roger’s room, that, if he was to impress his friends, he’d need to learn how to handle this real gun, pronto. And the only person who might teach him, he reckoned, was Roger.

But Gabriel had felt weird somehow about calling any attention to the pistol. It wasn’t that he felt uneasy with it in the house. It didn’t scare him. It was just that he hadn’t known what to say, or if it was even okay to say anything. Whether it was against the rules to do so. If the subject was too personal for conversation. So, Gabriel had kept quiet. When Roger came upstairs a few minutes later to say goodnight, Gabriel just returned the sentiment and went to bed.

Now, after pursuing the serial killer, Scorpio, gun in hand, across the moonlit rooftops of his dreams, Gabriel felt compelled to speak up.

“Have you ever shot anything?” he said.

“What’s that?” said Roger, slipping his left hand into the glove.

Gabriel pointed at the pistol, and Roger looked down at it, as if by magic the gun had appeared there. “Well, shit,” he said. He reached inside the bag and took out a hammer and a white smoking block of dry ice; its subzero coldness made the dark new hairs on Gabriel’s arms bristle. “Live alone long enough and you forget sometimes the world can still see you. But to answer your question: gators. Florida’s rife with them.”

“Was it with that gun?”

“Oh, I don’t shoot this. It isn’t even loaded.”

“Is it broken?”

“Family heirloom.” He pinned the dry ice to the counter with his gloved hand and began breaking off little shards of it with the hammer. “Belonged to your great-grandfather Isaac. On my mother’s side.”

“What kind of gun did you shoot the gators with, then?”
“A shotgun.”
“So why are you carrying that pistol around?”
Roger smirked. “For fun.” He made his bushy eyebrows dance; an homage to Groucho Marx.
“That’s kind of lame.”
“If you say so.”

Gabriel took a sip of his orange juice and, with his napkin, twice dabbed away bits of pulp from the corners of his mouth. The “double-dab,” as Ron Yarbrough had coined it, was one of Gabriel’s rituals, a symptom of his chronic obsessive-compulsiveness. It was a minor ritual in comparison to others; a tic, really. His uncle had never noticed it, or if he had, he’d never brought it up, probably because it was so trivial. But even a minor ritual held formidable sway over Gabriel. There was nothing he could do to control it. The double-dab was something he had to do, for sanity’s sake. Often, he asked God for the disorder to go away, to make him normal like everyone else; but as Father Palmieri, his pastor at St. Gerard’s, was known to say, not all prayers are answered to our satisfaction.

“Did he ever shoot it?” Gabriel said.
“Who?” said Roger.
“My great-grandfather.”
“Once.”
“Only once?”
“That I know of.”
“What did he shoot with it?”
“A dove.”
“On purpose?”
“Mistake.”
“How could that happen?”
Roger brushed the shards of dry ice into a pile. “Harry’s never told you this story?”

“No,” said Gabriel. Harry Fischer, his father and Roger’s little brother, was a workaholic attorney, and never spoke of the family, or much else, besides baseball and legal matters.

“Well,” Roger said, “I don’t know all the
details. This was about seventy years ago, you know. Back in 1910. But I guess Isaac was at a shooting range one day with some friends of his, and then this dove came out of nowhere and flew right in front of the bullet.” He struck the palm of his gloved hand with the head of his hammer to reenact the fateful collision.

Gabriel gave Roger a quizzical look. “Flew in front of the bullet?”

“It’s like I say. Bad timing.”

“That’s a weird thing to happen to somebody.”

“You’re telling me.”

“And he never fired the gun again?”

Roger shook his head. “Isaac was a superstitious man. Jewish, you know. Steeped in the old tradition and all that. I was never much for going to temple myself. Your grandmother was the only devout one among us. But the story goes that Isaac thought the dove had cursed him, so he gave up shooting altogether.” Roger patted the gun at his side. “Not sure why he hung onto this, seeing as how much grief it caused him. Could have sold it for a pretty penny.”

Gabriel, only half listening, studied the pistol more curiously than before. “Do you still have your shotgun, Uncle Roger?”

Roger hummed in the affirmative. “Gotta scare off coyotes now and again to keep them from the chickens.”

“Maybe I can help you.”

Roger looked up. “How’s that?”

“If you teach me how to shoot.”

For a moment, Gabriel’s words hung in the air, like the vapors peeling off the dry ice. He stared at Roger, and Roger stared back. The acquiescent squint of his blue eyes, not to mention the apparent lawlessness of life on his property, suggested an impending yes. But then his gaze fell again to the counter. He said no.

“How come?” said Gabriel.

“Best to wait till you’re older.”

“How much older?”
“I don’t know. Older.”

Gabriel had a better idea. “Could I just hold the pistol a minute?”

“What for?”

“So you can take a picture of me, and I can show it to my friends back home?”

Roger frowned and squinted again. “What’s this all about, son?”

Gabriel downed the rest of his orange juice. Double-dabbed. He could lie to his uncle, he knew, but he’d already given himself away. And to lie, of course, would be wrong. So, he told Roger the truth: that his rifle-toting friends considered him a pansy, and that if he could just prove to them with photographic evidence that he at least knew how to hold a gun, if not shoot it, then maybe they’d cut him a break.

Roger smiled at Gabriel, as if to hide how foolish he thought his argument was. “Sounds to me like you need some new compadres.” He took off the glove and handed it over. “Listen, I’ll think about it. Better you learn from me than any of those boys. In the meantime, why don’t you do the next part.”

Gabriel was encouraged by Roger’s willingness to help. But if he’d learned anything in life, it was that grown-ups often lied to appease the young. The way his former science teacher, Ms. Ochsner, would promise a weekend of no homework, only to assign a long set of exercises before the final bell rang. The way his father would agree to play catch with him in the street, only to forget about it and hole up in his office the rest of the day.

And so Roger’s words were not quite enough to fully erase the disappointment Gabriel felt in what his measly thirteen years afforded him. He accepted the glove with a shrug.

Roger Fischer was pushing sixty, and yet his hobbies were those of a teenage boy. A former real estate mogul and lifelong bachelor, he was an avid flyer of model airplanes, and zipped all over the forty-eight acres of golden rabbitbrush to which he’d recently retired, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, on the back of a Honda dirt bike.
But the thing he loved to do most was set off homemade explosives.

The dry ice bomb blast was as deafening as that of a grenade; it left a high ringing in Gabriel’s ears, and riled the chickens into a frenzied chorus. One of them, a Polish hen, bounced around the pen in circles, clucking with her wings up as if the coop were under attack. A star-shaped piece of plastic landed near the oak tree behind which Gabriel and Roger had crouched some thirty feet away. When the huge white cloud of smoke dissipated, Roger slapped Gabriel on the back and let out a sonorant “Sweet Jesus!” Gabriel joined in by hollering “Hot damn!” but mostly just to be a good sport.

Around 1:30 that afternoon, Roger remembered he had a dentist appointment in Denver at 2:00, and rushed out the front door, much to Gabriel’s bewilderment, with the holster still strapped to his waist.

“Uncle Roger!” Gabriel called from the porch. “Your gun!”

But Roger waved his hand at him, and shouted, “This is the Wild West, amigo!” Then he got in his pick-up, a black antique Ford, and drove off.

Back inside, it was hard for Gabriel to resist the temptation, with the house now to himself, to conduct a clandestine search for the shotgun and the camera. It wasn’t like he needed Roger’s help with taking the picture. His older sister Janet had shown him how to set a timer, how to adjust a tripod. He could do it all on his own, and put everything back where he’d found it, and Roger would never be the wiser.

But ultimately Gabriel’s good conscience won out, as it was liable to do. Instead of rummaging through his uncle’s possessions, he made a turkey sandwich for lunch, and then took Roger’s dirt bike for a spin.

He weaved through the rabbitbrush out to the creek that ran along the northern edge of the property. Gabriel dismounted the bike there and sat down in the tall grass. He removed his boots, the right one first, then the left, and then off came his socks in that same order.

In the midday sunlight, the water was calm and marbled. Gabriel threaded his big toes through
it. A twig floated by, and he snatched it out of the water. He whipped it through the dense summer air like a machete. The twig made a *thwoosh* with every stroke.

The prospect of firing the shotgun prevailed in his imagination. He wished he could fire the pistol, so he could be like Dirty Harry. But beggars couldn’t be choosers. And the shotgun was more impressive. In the picture, if he were to take it, he’d pretend to wag the barrel of the gun at some psychopathic killer. Make a face like he was in the midst of telling the guy what’s what. Telling the guy he was a punk. A punk like that one kid at school, Kevin Brewer, on whom he secretly had a crush, despite the fact that Kevin teased him about everything.

Gabriel dropped the twig in the creek and let the water carry it away.

When he returned to the house, and found that Roger was still out, his conscience failed him. He parked the dirt bike in the garage and proceeded to open cabinets and drawers. In the toolshed in the backyard, he did the same. Upstairs in Roger’s room, he looked under the bed and in the closet. He looked under the bed in the guest room, where he’d been sleeping, and in the closet there.

Then in the downstairs hall closet, behind Roger’s many fur-lined winter coats, he found the camera, a black-and-silver Nikon, attached to a folded-up tripod. All that was left to do now was locate the shotgun; but when the front door unlocked, Gabriel knew it would have to wait. He fled to the den, leapt onto the couch, and began thumbing through the latest Robb Report in an effort not to look suspicious.

Roger entered the kitchen and poured himself two fingers of bourbon, which he topped off with a can of Coke. “Cards?” he suggested.

Glad to have avoided getting caught, Gabriel agreed, and for the next two hours, they played gin rummy on the deck. Then they went out for burgers at a diner in downtown Boulder, where Roger flirted with the waitress, a Mexican woman named Yolanda, who assured Gabriel that his uncle was her favorite customer. Roger left her a fat tip, and when he and Gabriel returned home, they dug into pints of rocky road and watched an old John Wayne western that soon seduced Roger into a deep sleep.

Gabriel waited half an hour to make sure
Roger had truly conked out. Then he got up from the couch and snuck away to the only seemingly logical place the shotgun would be.

The door to the basement was off the kitchen, and from the top of the stairs Gabriel could smell the subterranean mustiness, the odor of a wet Labrador Retriever; the way St. Gerard’s smelled in December, when the weather turned cold and rainy. He’d never been down to the basement before, and the stairs were dark, and there was no light switch to flip, so he had to hold the railing as he descended. The shag carpet underfoot muffled his steps, and when he felt a sneeze coming on, he was able to stifle it by pinching just below the bridge of his nose.

The gun was down here somewhere, he thought. Locked away in a cabinet, most likely, with all the ammo and whatever else came with gun ownership. He wasn’t experienced enough to know. But that didn’t matter. All he needed was the gun, and with a little luck, he’d happen upon the key, and remember its hiding place for tomorrow; for whenever the opportunity presented itself to return with the camera.

He took another step. Then another. His conscience began tugging at him, telling him to turn back. But he kept his better judgment at bay. What he needed now was a plan. An excuse. He needed to know how he’d explain himself to Roger, if he was found milling about, looking around where he shouldn’t be. What reason was there to go down to the basement that didn’t involve finding the gun?

He paused. Rolled his lower lip under his front teeth. He didn’t need to be doing this. “Stupid,” he whispered to himself. The photo wouldn’t really impress anyone. It would likely have the opposite effect, and everybody would laugh him off the playground. “What a fag,” Kevin Brewer would proclaim.

If only Dirty Harry were his uncle. Or his—

FROWNG!

Gabriel yelped and, dropping to his knees, grabbed on to the railing with both hands, to barricade himself from whatever lay below. The crash—like a sack of oranges thrown against a gong—had brought his inner voice to an immediate hush. The noise wasn’t as loud as a dry ice bomb explosion,
but in its abruptness, and like almost any strange sound in the night, it was startling.

Quickly, quietly, he got to his feet and ran back upstairs and shut the door behind him. He couldn't hear anything on the other side, and the chickens, so far as he could tell, were undisturbed. But he worried all the same that now something with teeth, half-alive and all the hungrier for it, was prowling around the basement. The window down there was large enough for a coyote to fit through. Had it run full speed at the glass, like a battering ram?

Gabriel was perhaps more afraid, though, that the commotion had roused his uncle, and he feared as he stood there, with his back against the door and his heart racing, that a full interrogation awaited. Roger was more lenient and understanding than his father, but Gabriel didn’t like to be reprimanded by anyone. It always made him feel queasy—before, during, and after—whether he deserved a talking-to or not.

When he returned to the den, on tiptoe, he was relieved to find Roger as he'd left him: in the armchair, snoring, off somewhere with Yolanda in his dreams.

Early the next morning, before Roger awoke, Gabriel armed himself with a nine-iron procured from the garage and went into the backyard to investigate. The chickens were all out, pecking around as normal in their pen. The air was already heavy and warm.

He went to the side of the house, where he expected to find shattered glass in the dirt. But the basement window was completely, unexpectedly intact. The glass blemish-free.

He thought perhaps he’d dreamt the whole thing up—until he spotted the long black raven’s feather, glossy and matted with dried blood, lying in the dirt.

Gabriel took a step back and looked around the yard. He imagined the bird, stunned and injured by the crash, might have gone off into the weeds, or behind the coop, or the tool shed, to nurse its wounds. There was no raven to be found anywhere, though, and so it appeared the bird had survived, flown away. Still, wherever it was now, it was hurt, and Gabriel felt to blame, as if his going
down to the basement had somehow prompted the crash. He thought about fate, Isaac and the dove; the eerie, awful timing of it all.

He set the golf club against the house and knelt down beside the feather. The wind would probably blow it away, but it would be better, he figured, if he were to move it himself. It would be better for his peace of mind if he didn’t let Roger find it, even though, to Roger, the feather would signify nothing.

Moving the feather involved touching it, and Gabriel didn’t want to do so with his bare hands. He slipped his right arm inside his shirt and, from under the fabric, picked the feather up by its milk-colored tip.

Holding it this way, he carried the feather far out into the yard, past the coop, past the oak tree, to a place where the rabbitbrush grew in a circle; to a place where no one but the raven, flying overhead, would ever see it. He squeezed himself between two bushes fuzzy with pollen and entered the circle, where he dropped the feather on the ground.

The right thing to do then, he thought, was to pray. He didn’t know if birds had souls, or if praying for something without a soul was wrong, or just a waste of time. Praying for himself had never amounted to much. But he prayed anyway. That the bird might live, and that, for his sake, it may not come back that way again.
Imagine the child not falling far from the metaphor. Imagine being the apple of his hesitation. Imagine a daisy chain crown of thorns. Imagine blood of the covenant being thicker than water of the women. Imagine the covenant being unbreakable. Imagine believing in unbreakability. Imagine a family photo where we all are smiling. Imagine a family photo where we all are. Imagine togetherness. Imagine his eyes crinkling with her smile. Imagine never seeing your father enough to know if his eyes are yours. Imagine your father's eyes. Imagine the first time he wept. Imagine the tender kiss of the tear like a child. Imagine salt. Imagine sadness. Imagine your father naming sadness. Imagine him waiting two weeks to hold it in his arms, afraid to drop it. Imagine him dropping it. Imagine his waking up with sadness miles away. Imagine sadness writing his eulogy. Imagine sadness looking through every photo album, trying to find its eyes on his face. Imagine in every photo, your father is blinking.
Knotholes ~
Gillian Haines

In a place of broken men, I became whole.

Ten years ago, I volunteered to forge friendships with four maximum-security prisoners who didn’t share my values. Seventy percent of volunteers at federal prisons go to preach, although I had no dogma to proselytize. But I learned that one ordinary person reaching out to understand another is holy.

I stared into a dust-filmed dressing-table mirror. My hazel eyes too bright. What am I doing? I’m a goody-two-shoes, they’ll make mincemeat of me. Five-foot tall and scared of anger. Narrow shoulders prone to self-sacrifice and putting people on pedestals. But that wasn’t why my friends advised against the visits. They knew I was struggling to cope with an imposter who’d worn my husband’s clothes since a stroke felled him to the carpet beside his aunt’s foldaway cot.

Unsure of my motives, I decided to visit prison anyway. Unless you are being trite, it takes courage to own a desire to help someone. It also requires acknowledgment of your power. And when I started visiting prison, mine was at its lowest ebb.

Wulf, a twenty-five-year-old mercenary with a forty-five-year sentence, a prisoner to whom I’d been randomly assigned, said, in answer to my question about how he found out that his wife had become a drug addict while he was deployed in Iraq, “I beat it out of her.”

His blue eyes were so still. The color of a vein pulsing beneath thin skin. The gaze of a man trained to look through gun-scopes.

I squirmed in my hard plastic seat. No cat in the world would settle on a prison chair. Chairs have back-rests and arm-rests. But prison chairs are not for comfort, they are designed to keep people separated.

“I was looking up my bank balance. There was supposed to be forty thousand there, but the account was overdrawn. I helicoptered to Kuwait and flew home. Seventy-two hours in a cold rage.” He suddenly sat back. Glossy bald head reflecting
light from the fluorescents. Freckled hands tugging on a chest-length beard that looked like rusty steel wool.

“Anything could have happened with you so far away. People say anger isn’t our first reaction, fear is primary. Weren’t you afraid?”

“Nope. I felt rage. Not worry or fear. That’s a myth. When someone shoots at me, it doesn’t make me scared. It makes me angry. I think, ‘Don’t you shoot at me! I’m gonna shoot you!’” He pointed, laughing. “And you, and you, and you, too!”

I boycott gratuitous violence in movies. I am repulsed by pairing laughter and violence, yet I shared that laugh. The disconnect between Wulf’s comic portrayal and his casual reference to killing was too uncomfortable to contain.

“When I got home, I walked through the door saying, ‘Where’s the money?’ My wife said, ‘What money?’ I hit her and she passed out. I waited till she came around and I hit her again. I hit her until she told me what happened.”

“My God! You didn’t know your own strength. You couldn’t modulate it.”

The loudspeaker blared. “Chow is closed.”

“I do, and I can.”

That scrupulous honesty made me swallow. Every time his wife blacked out, he’d had a chance to reconsider, to regret that first punch.

“She bought heroin for her mom and her mom’s boyfriend. It was quite a party!”

I didn’t know whether I’d punch someone for forty thousand dollars and I’d never risked my life in a war zone. I tried not to judge. My role as a visitor, Wulf’s only visitor, was to engage in meaningful connection, not to condemn. “Your rage was because you’d earned that money while risking your life?”

“Yes! She ruined everything! I was going to retire early. She broke our family.”

“Had you hit her before?”

“Once.”

The air suddenly felt stuffy and I wished I could see outside. Rain was in the forecast. But in the desert, even when the purple clouds are so low
that you feel like you could puncture them with your fingernails, even when the smell of rain is unmistakable in your nostrils, you can't trust that it will fall.

“You don't hide or sugar-coat, do you?”

“No.”

I admired that directness. *Does it come from a place of no conscience? What would shame a mercenary?*

I felt his eyes assessing me. “I hit her when she threw a three-and-a-half-thousand-dollar computer against the wall.”

My Bureau of Prisons’ training emphasized that men who spend time in prison are never to be trusted. But a *New York Times* article identified the attributes that war heightens in elite soldiers those like Wulf, with several tours under their belts): intense vigilance, snap decisions, and a willingness to punish those who cross lines.

When we’d known each other six months, Wulf said, “The yard’s tense as hell. A tinderbox.” Glancing both ways, he lowered his voice. “Look, I’m not saying this to make myself out a hero or anything. But I’m trying to sort things out.” He weighed my expression before crossing his feet on the grey-flecked floor-tiles. “That probably sounds self-serving.”

He became quiet and I waited.

“I’m kind of a leader in my block. I try to disarm the hot-heads. You’ve got to understand that once these things start, they escalate out of all proportion and everyone suffers.”

“It sounds impossible.”

“I’ve got to live here for a long time. I’ll do whatever I can to make it decent.” He pointed at himself and opened his palms. “I don’t want to fight! In here, everyone loses.” His eyes narrowed and he pointed at me as though I were an enemy, his taut body ready to strike. “But if you start something, you’d better be serious because I’m going to die trying to hurt you.” He shrugged. “I try to find a way out without anyone losing too much face.”

“How did you become a leader?”

He opened those calm focused eyes. “It sounds funny, but guys in prison want someone they can trust. There’s so much maneuvering and
manipulation. They want someone who talks straight. And they know I’m not a coward.”

“Do the officers recognize your position?” My training would have suggested that my awakening admiration was a reaction Wulf had been angling for.

He shook his handsome face, laughing, eyes twinkling. “No! Let’s say I get a certain amount of respect.”

I wondered how much of my life to share with him. But I’m not naturally guarded. And in the crazy stroke-house where I lived with my husband, authenticity was my sole coping strategy. Last week, I’d left Jon under our backyard grapefruit tree, beside a table I’d been building. I was proud of that table. My first woodworking project. With my plane, sheaves of fine-grit sandpaper, and my own two hands, I’d transformed splinters to satin. But during my absence of two minutes, Jon sawed six inches from one of its legs. His impulse was an attempt at helpfulness, but my table was ruined. I felt guilty to hear myself cuss. To hear my strident tone.

Later, Jon fixed me with a brown-eyed glare, the blade of his square jaw tense. “Losing abilities doesn’t change my identity. My actions are still consistent with my deepest intentions. I haven’t changed in important ways!”

“You might feel the same but what you do and say are the only ways I can know you. You’ve lost empathy and flexibility. You’ve become self-absorbed and bad-tempered.”

Jon snorted dismissively. Shirt buttons misaligned. Uncombed dark hair sticking out in rough tufts. “Abilities, activities, achievements — they’re not who we are! I’m the same person I always was.”

He was right, but I wanted to scream. At the coffee-shop he’d leaned across the table to grab our eight-year-old daughter’s pound cake before catapulting pieces at her with his fork. I’d yelled at them both and Lena came to me later. “I don’t understand why Dad’s being like that, Mum. He’s home from hospital. Why isn’t he better? Why are we pretending things are back to normal? Grownups aren’t supposed to do that.”

I lived inside a tsunami, protecting Jon during his seizures, dousing his cooking fires,
thwarting disinhibited shopping sprees, and anticipating when his frustration led him to thump and break gadgets, electronics and windows. I could only cope because I was honest about how I felt. I told Jon, “Look, it’s probably necessary for you to believe you’re unchanged. Ego insists on its own integrity. My perception is different, but I still love you.” I took a slow breath, softening my tone. Sincere and tender. “We can go on.”

When I fell in love with Jon decades prior, I folded like a gauze scarf into the palm of his hand, barely questioning why I should be the one to sever ties with family and country. Foolishly, I thought that my past delight in six-month forays to Asia, Europe and South America proved the ease with which I’d make the transition to living in a foreign America. Now, I spend my days pondering the mysteries of who we are. Whether my minnow self, released to a different stream, was the same fish. If it wasn’t a betrayal of the man I married to transfer my love to the well-briefed identical twin who now shared my bed. Whether it was possible to build friendship with a sex-offender when I knew, had we had met on the streets, a relationship wouldn’t have had a chance.

A stroke and prison are alike in that they strip away pretense. So, I didn’t pretend with Wulf either. One day, he asked, “You okay? You seem flat.”

“Arguments at home.”

“I’m sorry.”

I sighed. “It’s Jon’s brain injury.”

“You know, mine got better.” He pointed at I.E.D scars, pink cauterized skin, laughing. “Well, at least I think it did!”

“Yes. Jon’s gets better all the time, but it was so massive, some things are gone forever.” I’d tried before to explain my husband. I’d tried with everyone I knew. But there were no words for the things that went wrong in our house. He set the table for sixteen when there were only three of us. He released our blue and yellow parakeets before opening the front door. But I tried not to view him solely through the lens of disability. My delight when he continued to publish in scientific journals, genuine. My kisses still tender even through the years when he didn’t know if he climaxed or not. The Japanese revere the deformed and the mended. They use gold to fill cracks in beloved hand-pinched pots. Just as I loved Jon even when
he dribbled and slurred and shouldered into signposts.

Wulf and I sat in the bare visiting room. The air coated in dust. Beads of sweat tickled my upper lip and I wiped them with my forearm. Even my feet felt damp.

He lowered his voice, “I’m getting a tattoo on my back.”

“In here? How’s that possible?”

“I got a good guy. I drew it up and he’s started work. I wish I could show you.”

“What’s the design?”

“An angel.” He held my eyes with his steady stare. “Wings spread, fighting against chains that are pulling him into the pit.”

“Wow. Dramatic.” An angel? Pulled into the pit? His Norse religion didn’t feature angels. He didn’t identify with losers. But I didn’t dare ask if he were innocent. By that stage, I cared about him but didn’t know if I could believe him. Then suddenly, I realized that if I weren’t risking naivety in my conversations with felons, I may as well go home. To create any deep kind of deep relationship I had to give my trust. Deep relationships were the only kind that could prompt change. In me and them.

I quivered and shook my head rapidly, poking out my tongue. “Bllarrgh! Needles! Fluids forced into your skin! I don’t know how you can do it.” Not the reaction he wanted, but he laughed.

The glossy white walls threw back glare. The microwave beeped, babies cried, and the seven vending machines thudded out sodas.

I understood the magnetism that drew me to Wulf. The emotional landscape I encountered with him was reminiscent of feelings provoked by Jon — discomfort and a sense of never being in control.

When I first met Jon, his talk of constant change and growth seduced me. When he said he couldn’t pursue his research in Australia, I left my country. After his stroke, I swallowed my needs to put his recovery first. His wounded brain turned the power dynamics in our family on their head. His dangerous behavior — building a bonfire next to our neighbor’s wooden fence, abandoning our too-young daughter alone at home — turned me into his mother. But with limited self-awareness, and
talking about equality, Jon wanted to dismantle our relationship and rebuild it from scratch. Again and again, to comply with his wishes and my idealism, I put myself in that place of tension.

Wulf expected nothing from me. It was the inexplicable commands of my own subconscious that led me to that familiar treacherous place, a place where I was unsure of my footing, where I wobbled and rock-hopped, trying to understand him.

Jon’s profound intelligence was difficult to reconcile with his mental disabilities. He routinely wore his fly undone but his cancer research had the potential to revolutionize treatment. Wulf’s contradictions were just as unfathomable. He had killed for money. Yet although he only earned thirty dollars a month in the prison kitchen, he and his cell-block buddies bought soap, deodorant and shower shoes and made up welcome packets for new inmates. Jon and Wulf resisted easy descriptions and rote responses but the confusion they caused me felt like the grit that burnishes.

Four years into my friendship with Wulf, he found a Canadian pen-pal. A Goth who dressed in black. A woman who quizzed him about his military training. “I was wrong,” he said, “she’s not trying to sneak across the border. Turns out she’s planning for a catastrophic disaster. A nuclear bomb. I said the first thing she’s got to do is get out of the city. But she’s a single mom. I told her straight: the kids will be a liability.”

“Why?”

His eyelids fascinated me. Most peoples’ flash open and shut so quickly that you don’t notice movement. I waited as Wulf’s lids rose steadily: a slow unveiling. Seconds prior, he was somewhere else entirely.

“Think about it! Civilization’s skin is very thin. It doesn’t take much to shed. I’ve seen it over and over. People do whatever it takes to survive. Gets ugly fast.”

“But there are always decent people who help others, share resources and work for the group. Not everyone needs rules and cops to keep themselves in check. Some would protect her.”

“And what would those guys want in return?”

“I get it. When there are no rules, people turn mean, men rape. But not everyone.”
I was acutely conscious that I lived my life as if death were not real. I’d never needed a man skilled in the art of hurting. In certain circumstances, Wulf could be a savior but in peacetime, and in those early years, I wanted to change him.

I looked around the visiting room and noticed, not for the first time, a prisoner staring. His face broke into an obsequious smile. Furtive eyes crawled over my body like a tarantula as he leaned across the aisle. “Good morning to ya!” I wanted to squirm and shake my blouse. I was relieved when he noticed Wulf’s cold stare before quickly looking away.

I asked Wulf if boredom were his enemy. His freckled face jerked up, frowning. “No! I’ve got too much to get done!” He described classes and correspondence and spiritual practices but also his work to get a Department of Veteran Affairs representative to come to prison to serve all the vets, when he could have just written letters to sort out his own business. I had no true understanding of what men need to survive in prison. Probably hatred and a shank. But Wulf’s plans were Himalayan. “I’ll spend most of my life in prison and I’m determined to use my time to improve myself.” Scarred hands ran down the length of his long red beard. “They only get one shot, but I help a lot of guys in here. I wouldn’t have before. I front them the money to start a business. Most fail miserably. But I do that. I had everything going for me and I ended up in here, what chance do they have?”

The air felt thick and stale. There were hardly any people in the visiting room, but everyone seemed to be shouting. The loudspeaker screeched.

“You’re a curious and resourceful person. Not many people find meaningful activity in here.”

He shrugged soldier-shoulders.

Strangely, I felt proud of him. Thinking about his loneliness and isolation as I went about life on the outside made me sad and uncomfortable. For his sake, I was glad Wulf made the most of life in prison. But it also eased a tension I held.

“You’ll get sick of me,” he said.

“What?”

“I can only talk about prison and my life before it. It’ll get old.”

“No.”
“My life is very limited.”

“Yet every month, you reliably produce interesting material for our conversations.”

When my husband lost one fifth to one quarter of his brain to a stroke, I never thought to leave him. I thought our roots had entwined. But when Jon landed a job with the National Institute of Cancer in Washington, D.C., he decided to leave Lena and me behind.

I wondered if I had listened to Jon as intently as I listened to Wulf, might Jon still be with me? After his stroke, Jon had started to text and phone me constantly, and I’d received those messages as burdens. *God, not again! Can’t he leave me alone for one minute?* My impatience and irritation made me feel guilty but eventually I stopped responding to my phone. It was a terrible betrayal. But I’d felt besieged. All our resources and my emotional energy sacrificed for his recovery.

Bereft of my beloved Australia, my husband, and even the image I had of myself, I questioned why I’d shaped my life to fit Jon. Moving to America for his career was foolish now that I lived here without him. Sacrificing my career to care for him while he battled paralysis and brain damage to reclaim academia was weak-minded now that I could no longer support myself. Some days, I sank to the floor weeping and calling myself names. *I am stupid, stupid, stupid!*

It shocked me how often I needed to declare my divorce, to don the shaven head of shame on questionnaires and on meeting new people. A hesitant pause always preceded my response. My answer always spoken in a thin metallic voice.

My friendship with Wulf helped me forgive myself. His white supremacist shoulders protected mentally-impaired inmates from prison bullies. His mercenary hands longed to cup his boys’ small heads. His sexist lips said that when he heard sexist comments, my voice in his head refuted them. I let go of judgment in favor of curiosity and wonder.

I began again to believe that Jon and I had created something precious. It ended before I expected but that did not undermine its worth. Paraphrasing poet Jack Gilbert: how can they say the marriage failed? It came to the end of its triumph.

The years passed, and Wulf got leaner. One-legged
squats sculpted his muscles to marble. It became harder for him to live a productive life. “One fuck-up and they’ve stripped everything from me.”

Since he was a small boy he’d hunted game for the table, split wood and stacked the kindling by the door. I realized then that hell is not fire but the slow unrelenting erosion of self.

“I’m a talented guy. I could make a difference. There are lots of us in here with knowledge and skills. But they’ve trashed us! Why don’t they just get it over with?”

“Are you saying they should kill you?”

The unspoken assent in his fixed stare chilled me.

No! I don’t believe it. “You told me that you do your time differently! You try to make a meaningful life!”

I blabbed while his cool eyes bored into mine. When I was finally silent, his intense stare remained. Only then did I notice that his blue eyes were red. But their gaze was unflinching.

“If I’d died in Iraq, it would’ve been in a blaze of glory! I wasn’t scared of death then and I’m still not.” A wave of self-consciousness bathed his brow in a sheen of sweat and he looked away.

My mouth felt dry. I romanticized him. How can anyone make meaning from forty-five years of punishment? I bent toward him. I would have taken him in my arms, but the guards forbade that.

“Think of your sons! Stay strong for them.”

Ginger eyebrows flickered dismissively. “What pain is better? The quick or the slow? Daddy’s dead or Daddy’s in prison for forty-five years?”

I started to protest but didn’t want to lie. “Oh, that’s a terrible question!”

Above him, the florescent light buzzed and flickered. Those lights that cast no shadows seemed to undress us.

“I have the freedoms you hunger for,” I sat so far forward, I risked slipping off my seat, trying to close the four-foot gap between our knees. “I’m fifty-seven. I’ve reached a stage in my life where things are stripped away. It’s come to you earlier than most, but it comes to all of us. We look ahead and the world’s not brimming with possibility. Our way forward becomes restricted. Age takes our beauty, our strength. Bad luck takes our resources.
We have to deal with that...” I babbled on in that bastion of lost potential, feeling like an idiot when I wanted so desperately to comfort. But what comfort can be conjured in a place where men kill time?

But he wiped his eyes and his face took on a strange expression. “I always go over and over our conversations but last month, all I could think about was your top!” I’d worn a blouse printed with Van Gogh’s *Almond Blossom*. “I couldn’t get it out of my head! We don’t see stuff like that in here.”

Emotions in prison are never pure. My happiness at his pleasure undercut, because he hadn’t seen a tree in a decade. I looked down at my blouse. Swallows and pendulous blossoms on vintage kimono fabric. I’d washed my hair with apple-scented shampoo. Hints of nature’s beauty in a place that excluded it.

I told him that I’d come in that morning not sure how I could sit still. That my pain and grief panicked me. It made me want to run but there was nowhere to run to. I gazed into his eyes and told him that he’d settled me. I’d come in that morning feeling as insubstantial as exhaled cigarette smoke, but he gave me the sense that I brought in something precious.

We’d known each other for seven years when I teased him about his long red beard. It was beginning to part in the middle. “It’s like Yosemite Sam’s!”

“I know it!” He smoothed the two coarse strands together, laughing. A rich warm laugh. “It’s not what I had in mind! It’s got a mind of its own.”

Then his gaze turned inward. “When you survive a battle, the smell of liquid shit in your nose, every cell feels alive. It’s a rush! Sexual arousal is common.” His eyes never left my face, gauging my reaction.

I nodded, tensing.

“Rape happens every day. It’s not rare like the news makes out. Rape and killing. The Hajjis hate us and we hate them. You get to a stage where killing means nothing.”

With all my heart, I hoped this man I cared for was a soldier who had never raped. Maybe I was a coward, but I never asked. In prison, the fortress of boundaries, I drew lines I never crossed. Only ask when you can deal with the answer.

A few months ago, Wulf whispered, “I never even
knew I had a bad beginning before I met you. My first memory was my Mom beating me. My second memory was being molested. I used to think it was normal.”

Not letting go of his summer-sky eyes, I nodded, softly, over and over. Like many men in prison, he was victim and perpetrator rolled into one skin. It explained why he chose a career based on invulnerability. Why he grew up despising weak men.

Over nine years of friendship, we have shared so much about ourselves. But you need more than talk to know the whole of a person. My knowledge of Wulf is like peering at someone through a knot-hole in a wooden fence. I only know him imperfectly. But that’s how I knew my husband. That’s how I know myself.

The loudspeaker spluttered a tinny garble, “Sweat lodge recall!” Time for Native Americans to end their purifying rites.

Inhaling deeply, I hesitated. “Have you ever considered suicide?”

His face hardened and he jerked forward. Hot breath on my face. “They’re not gonna find me hanging from a little bit of string! They’ll have to shoot me!”

I searched his red face, convincing myself that he wasn’t angry at me. “Even here? Forty-five years is such a long time.”

“I won’t lie,” he lowered his voice. “It crossed my mind when I was first sentenced. But it’s not in my nature. I’m going to die trying!”

“When I was scared Jon would leave me…” I cleared my throat to quell its tremble. “I wanted to kill myself.” A surge of shame shot my eyes to the floor, but I straightened my spine and found his eyes. “I had no fight left. Why did my thoughts go that way and yours don’t?”

“Jon abandoned me in a country where I never wanted to live. I can’t go home because Lena wants to stay. I sold my Australian house and used up my assets long ago. I don’t have a job. After a decade of caring for him, my résumé is a joke. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not suicidal now. That was
before. But I gave everything. My daughter was the one thing I held on to. Otherwise, who knows what I would have done.” My voice broke again. I wanted arms around me.

The red bloom on Wulf’s face paled. He nodded.

There was a whiff of bleach, although a long ribbon of ragged grime caterpillared along the seam where the wall met the floor.

“I don’t want to go there again,” I said. “I want to know how you dealt with so much loss without thinking about suicide. I’m midway through my life and I want to shed anxiety and grow stronger.”

He nodded, barely blinking. Eyes a tender balm. “I don’t know why, Gillian.”

I slumped back. Just thinking about it exhausted me. We are half-known creatures, even to ourselves. Although I posed the question, I’d understood that it was unanswerable.

_How can he not despair?_ His dad stole the savings Wulf’s wife hadn’t squandered. His mum and brother didn’t write. He would grow old and weak in a place rife with predators. But surrender was not in his vocabulary. I wanted to cultivate such tenacity.

“Anger helps,” he said, thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of killing myself! But that’s not all of it. Me, I’ve always been determined. I never give up. I enjoy pushing myself, working hard. I want to succeed wherever I am.”

“Working hard isn’t it. I work hard, too, but for other people or for praise and validation. You do it to test yourself.” I sighed. “It’s not that you’re a fighter and I’m not, because I am. After Jon’s stroke, I fought hard to help him. But why don’t I fight that hard for myself?” I looked around the visiting room. The room with no windows, the room of unnatural and unforgiving light, the room of no shadows.

Our voices soft, perched on the edges of our too-far-apart seats, our faces as close as we could get them.

“Look,” Wulf said. “Everybody breaks under torture. It’s just a matter of when or under what conditions.”
Anticipating the Storm’s Path ~
Jeff Ewing

Picture these magnolias disheveled, petals open to the wind; imagine these patio chairs airborne if you can,

watch the egrets shoved like chess pieces across the checkerboard of South Florida.

The bricolage of plywood nailed across smudged windows signals without signifying—Life or death, which way would you jump? Would you save the neighbor or the dog?

A small part of you welcomes the wind, a chance to show what you’re made of. Another part

remembers what that is: wood and bone, an undone door rattling its jamb.

The swimming pools from above swell blue as sky seen from within the eye. The Everglades ripple

with the first onshore breath, sawgrass blades fluttering their thousand lashes.
Rope Ladders are Neither Quick Nor Fun But Exist Only For Whimsy ~

Zebulon Huset

My treehouse is on fire. The sand dunes have migrated south like feral guinea pigs. We speak in tongues in cheeks with dimples aflame.

She attends the vanity, circular fun-house mirror. Dog days ashamed of their own increments. Orange licks each oak Planck time and again and we wither in the standard derivation.

She focuses on the cover. One eye shuttered at a time. The bokeh about merely vignetting. The blaze contours her face into a mirage, again. My croak no princely hiccup. Closed, her eyes blend into dark ash above a Cheshire smile.
“I’ll have the Gravlax,” Rose said, still looking at the menu.

“Smor-gas-bord for me, please.” Maya struggled with pronunciation.

Leonard waved to his friend Zachary, a chubby, bespectacled intellectual who appeared out of nowhere and joined the table. Both ordered Swedish meatballs. As the two men discussed the value of a Cornell education, Rose noticed how striking the new Smorgas waiter was—a young Robert Redford, blond, willowy, with radiant pink cheeks.

“You know when God created men, he gave some beauty, some brains, and others the ability to make money,” said Leonard, always the philosopher, staring directly at Rose.

“And he never gave anyone all three? That’s just sad,” Maya chimed in.

“Well, I want it all!” Rose replied defiantly. Zachary tensed, cutting his meatball in half.

For a brief moment, the November sun hung above the water illuminating the strip and then collapsed into the ocean, like a giant pebble. Rose liked to watch this celestial body at rest from her balcony. She was the only one out of all her friends who owned a condo on Driftwood Drive—a long beach promenade of restaurants and bars. She bought it with her own money. At twenty-seven she belonged to herself. For weeks she had been dodging calls from Zachary who had invited her out to dinner. She was still too young, even pretty in a certain kind of light, to settle for Zachary. She could have had ten Zacharys at Cornell during her undergrad, or when she lived in London doing her MBA. She called Leonard and asked him to let Zachary down easy. An investment manager and a rising star at a private equity firm, Rose was good at delegating.

In the morning she boarded a train to work and thought about men she could see while waiting for the real thing, men she could breathe for, lose weight for, get dressed for, get naked for. Who did she know? The answer came to her just as the train
pulled into the station, the doors opened, and he walked in and sat down across from her with a cup of coffee and a newspaper. The beautiful waiter from Smorgas.

She watched his lean, muscular legs flex, tense in the rhythm of the train, his straw hair fragile under a baseball cap, his long fingers tightening around Styrofoam. Were these the hands of her lover? She felt he was hers, even in that uncertain morning he was no stranger, there was no distance.

That same day after work she met her friends at Sugar Baby where they drank Moroccan mint tea and smoked outside. He walked by, she couldn’t believe it, twice in one day. She waited until he reached the end of the block and screamed, “Hey, what’s your name?”

He turned around. “Matteo,” he shouted, “and you?”

“Rose...” echoed in the corners of Driftwood Drive.

On Saturday night she dragged her friends to Smorgas. There was a twenty-minute wait. When they were finally seated, Matteo recognized her and smiled from across the room, a simple open smile, like an open heart, an open book. She watched him as he carried dishes and wine glasses to loud, hungry customers. He had beautiful posture, graceful fluid movements, a leap of faith in his walk. If carrying dishes was ever an art form, he would be the ultimate master.

They collided somewhere between the bathroom and the kitchen.

“What does Smorgas mean?” she asked flirtatiously.

“Oh, it is a sandwich...eh...open sandwich.”

She didn’t expect him to have an accent. She asked if he was Swedish. He said he was.

When she returned to her table she was a little disappointed he didn’t ask for her number, but she told her friends that it’s no big deal. They would just have to come back here next weekend, and the weekend after that, until he asks. Walking home in the frostbite of winter, Maya told Rose they didn’t have to come back to Smorgas, that while she was in the bathroom, by a majority vote, they gave the waiter her number, written on a
napkin, folded four times. “Frankly we can’t afford to keep coming back to this place.” Rose was furious at this betrayal. She tried to fall asleep dreaming of his body.

She woke up wondering when he will call, if he will call, if sex, if passion, if late-night meetings, if they would have bagels in the morning. Leonard emailed her during the day asking if the waiter had called, she said no, almost in tears, he replied it was still too early. After work she met Maya at Hachikari and over a plate of dragon rolls, they spoke about all the things going wrong in love. When they left the sushi bar, they ran into Matteo on the street. He was with another man, a waiter from Smorgas named Louis. “I was going to call you tonight.” Matteo gave her a happy-go-lucky smile, “We just dropped off laundry.”

The two men escorted Maya to her car and then walked Rose home. She invited them in for tea. They gave an inconspicuous nod to her doorman, then hovering in her hallway the two waiters shyly took off their shoes. They roamed her white apartment, as if it was the Taj Mahal. She introduced them to her dog, a silky terrier named Barky. Louis took his tea into the living room and started surfing the channels as if he had never seen a TV before. Matteo and Rose sat in the kitchen, warming their hands on the hot cups, warming each other’s hands, intertwining fingers in an intricate design, like the roots of a thousand-year-old tree. There was a shocking simplicity to him, she wondered if it was the language barrier, but it made his beauty less intimidating. He kissed her by the window, a perfect combination of lips, tongue and hands in all the right places. They stayed awake in bed until dawn, kissing, caressing, listening to Edith Piaf; everything in her was unraveling, lifting, blissful, every layer, every crease opening to him, he moaned like a little lamb, repeating how wonderful it is to be with her. In the living room, Louis was passed out on the couch as one porn film flickered after another, and somewhere off Driftwood there was laundry sitting, never picked up.

“Hold me close and hold me fast, the magic spell you cast,” Rose sang, combing through portfolios of high net-worth clients, “this is la vie en rose.” Matteo came to her every night after his shift, sometimes as late as two o’clock in the morning. She learned to live on three hours of sleep, and she never felt more rested, younger, more alive. He didn’t have much of a story—he was from some place called Rättvik, his parents divorced, he
came to America with his girlfriend, they broke up shortly after, he lived in a basement apartment with four roommates, he never went to college, he was in his early thirties.

She started counting the number of times they made love...twenty-three, thirty-six. It felt new every time. He had the body of a long-distance runner, slim, smooth, no fat, no flaws. He was generous with kisses, caresses, he never tired. Watching him sitting naked on her bed, eating chicken with his hands, she marveled at how the light fell on his face, like in a Caravaggio painting. She liked to listen to him explain for the thousandth time why he didn't call her first, about the power of need that is so strong that things happen without us trying, about God who exists in each and every one of us, and about her being his lover, his lover, his lover. He would tackle her, throw her down on the bed and make love to her again.

"Are you an aspiring actor or writer, engineer, or something," she asked him once.

"No. Why?"

"No reason."

She was meeting with friends more than ever, accepting every invitation, attending every function. She made a million Merry Christmas phone calls just to keep up appearances, to pretend like it was life as usual to compensate for her secret life, this secret bliss she was living in. They didn't need to know. One day she realized all this people-meeting and soirée-going was just something to do to fill up the time before she saw Matteo after midnight. On the nights when he didn't come she ached for him, where was he, was he with another woman, was he not in love with her anymore? She would throw a tantrum over the phone, cry, scream, delete his number, call him back, beg him to come over. He would show up a little tired, a little drunk, make love to her, pass out; she would sit up in bed wondering what was happening between them.

One evening he texted her, "911, must see you now." She thought, here we go—the other shoe had dropped, a ploy, a con, he needed money, a place to stay, she prepared herself for the worst. He came over with tears in his eyes—his father has died, in Stockholm. He lay on her Persian fireproof rug convulsing with sobs, Barky sat next to him extending his paws, soon she too was crying, comforting him, the three of them on the floor.
“When was the last time you saw your father?” she asked.

“When I was twelve years old,” he replied through hiccups.

She didn’t want to say anything to minimize his pain; instead she made a joke how Barky wanted to change his name to something more Scandinavian. “Let’s call him Casper,” she said, like a child who spotted a toy and forgot his tears. “My best friend is Casper, he lives in London, very rich...”

She asked him if women hit on him at work. He said sometimes...there would be ladies in the restaurant, smiling, winking, all covered in diamonds. There was one who came over every Sunday, always ordered the same salmon crepe du nord, watched his every move. Then one day when he was walking out of the bathroom, she pushed him back in, pulled down his pants, sucked on his cock like a tarantula, then threw him down on the toilet seat and straddled him, bouncing up and down, gyrating like a madwoman. When she was done she pulled up her panties, straightened her dress and walked out.

“What did you do?” Rose asked, her mouth hanging open.

“Nothing,” he scratched his ear, “she left a good tip.”

She tried to talk to him about books, the classics—Dickens, Steinbeck, Tolstoy, psychology, self-actualization, Maslow, Freud, the theater, Italian cinematography. She even rented a critically-acclaimed Swedish film, but he only shrugged his shoulders and switched the channel to HBO Boxing. She patted him on the head, as if he was a slow child.

Rose was invited to spend New Year’s Eve with some friends from Cornell. She didn’t want to go alone. She wondered if bringing Matteo was a mistake. “Why don’t you wear that cashmere jacket I gave you for Christmas,” she advised him, anxiously. It went fine, he was friendly and a little drunk and he hugged men at the party and everyone cheered in the rain of confetti. Matteo and Rose left at 4 a.m. and he insisted they walk through the park. She asked why. He said because it was romantic and of all women, she deserved romance the most.
One night in January, she was already sleeping when the phone rang, and it was him. She told him she loved him and he said, “When are we getting married and having babies?”

The next day, she attended the Cornell Future Leaders of America alumni mixer. She stood in a room full of blue blazers with brass buttons and tweed jackets with elbow patches, wondering how long she could keep this up, how long could she stay in love with Matteo.

“Hey Rose, how are you? How have you been?” Zachary approached her at the hors d’oeuvres table.

“Good. Working a lot, as usual.” She smiled.

“How is your boyfriend? Did you bring him here, to the Cornell Club?”

“What boyfriend?” Her feet had grown into the ground.

“You know, the really-cute-but-dumb-as-a-tree one.” Cornell was a small cruel world, after all.

Her body breaking into hives, “A tree is not dumb,” was all she could manage.

In February, it still hadn’t snowed. Rose came down with strep throat. She told Matteo to stay away, that he would get sick, but he kept a bottle of vodka in the freezer and shared her large feverish bed every night, twisting and turning, burning up, bones squeaking, sweat tumbling off, she thought that’s what family life is—sleeping badly together. She dreamt they were in Vermont, he was wearing a furry hat with lopsided ears and a yellow ski jacket, he was skiing, he was happy, and she was his wife, five months pregnant, and there were blue snowflakes everywhere and the endless sun, and life that worked out for the best.

She woke up to a text message, congratulating her on the first snow. He came over at three o’clock in the morning. Two feet of snow had fallen, the road from him to her was blocked off. His big boots, the ones he wore that first morning she saw him on the train, stood in the hallway covered in slush. “Why not marry him? Men have been doing it for years—married beautiful, simple women, the simpler the better, secretaries, shop girls, au pairs, Walmart cashiers, Hooters hostesses. Who cares what anyone thinks, life is too short!” thundered in her head. “Why not marry the beautiful, simple man?”
“You know you can marry him, no one is stopping you,” Maya, bless her heart, assured Rose.

But Rose knew that as short as life was, it was also incredibly long and full of mornings and evenings beyond passion, the tedious, dangerous everyday that devoured people like wild fire, destroying everything.

She agonized for weeks, calculated—risk evaluations, ratios, SWOT analysis, how to keep him, how to carve out a space for their love, throw a pin on the map where they can be together. She stood in front of him in the morning wearing her suit, wanting, needing to hear more, to listen to a man, a God, a hint of substance, a mental connection, but all she heard was slumberous breathing. Is that all there will ever be? The trees under her window, their dark scraggly branches had just rid themselves of the memory of last snow and were stretching their bony fingers to the sun. One night he took a legal pad off her table and scrawled with a Sharpie, “wat do u think abot me moving in hyer?” It wasn’t the spelling mistakes, but the poignant, childish curl of the t’s, that sealed her decision. Somber and stern, she shook her head no.

From then on, like the projection chart of a failing stock, it went consistently downhill. He would call to tell her he was coming over in ten minutes only to show up at dawn, wasted. “I can’t stand this disrespect,” she would scream, throw his pants on the floor, lock him out of the bedroom. There were weekends when he called and she was out, “No, I don’t know when I’ll be back.” One Friday she begged him to come over, told him she missed him like hell, he said he couldn’t leave, there was a wedding, she called him a fucking liar. “Who would have a fucking wedding at Smorgas?” Silence for a week. Then a call in the middle of the night, tongue-whirling kisses in the doorway, wild throbbing in the hall, a few nights of love, and then the usual, “I will not marry you, we have no future.” In April she texted him she still loved him, he said he was at Sun if she wanted to join. He introduced her to his table as just a friend, tried to pick up a barmaid, messaged some girl all night. Rose took every insult, every humiliation as punishment she deserved. At the end of the night he went home with her. They fucked in the dark like strangers. She asked him if he was in love with another woman and he said yes. She went into the kitchen and cried.

Over the next couple of months, she pieced
her life back together. It wasn't that hard, Matteo was just a nightly visitor. She caught up on sleep. She embraced a schedule that was not built around his midnight phone calls. Her apartment was her Taj Mahal, free of longing for impossible things. She went to work and she loved it for its blood sport, the smell of the chase, and the march of victory. The trees under her window had become green, silky umbrellas and she couldn't see the ground beneath them. With a desperate gaze towards the future she was moving on, she was looking forward to the next man she would meet, the woman she would become. Sometimes at a restaurant she would feel a slight heart murmur when she saw a handsome waiter working the tables. Over her goat cheese salad with walnuts, she would remember Matteo; he was somewhere out there, finishing his shift, putting chairs upside down, he was probably drinking more than usual, he was making love to another woman, just the thought of it made her feel faint. She didn't mention him to her friends anymore, but they knew not to go to Smorgas.

Once at a party when everyone had gone home, she was helping Leonard load up the dishwasher. She asked, quietly, out of breath, surprised by her own words, “Do you think he’ll be back...my lover?”

Leonard, wise, sage-like, looked at her and said, “Yes...Your lover will be back. That’s what lovers do, they leave, and they come back.”

The call she was waiting for came when she had already forgotten how to wait. On a warm summer night in June, Rose and her friends were eating crepes in the garden at Jean Francois. She didn’t recognize the number. “Hello? Oh...Hi...Matteo. How are you?” She got up and left the table. When she returned, she had an amused, somewhat shell-shocked smile on her face.

“What happened, what happened?” her friends asked in unison.

“I have a date...tomorrow night...with Matteo’s friend,” Rose said slowly, still trying to process it.

“Excuse me?” Maya exclaimed.

“What?” Leonard leaned in closer.

“Matteo called and said he has a man for me, his friend Casper, who just arrived from London.
His exact words were “he smart, cute, success, I think you will like him.” And he offered to make the introduction himself so tomorrow we are meeting at Driftwood Billiards.”

“You are not seriously considering it? That’s crazy. You can’t even play pool!” Maya said.

“That is crazy,” Leonard patted his chin, like Sherlock Holmes. “Men don’t usually set up women they used to sleep with other men. I am not buying it. But you should go anyway.”

She didn’t know what to wear. She put on a black dress with yellow sunflowers. When she walked into the rusty beer-stained joint, they were already arranging balls into a triangle on the green felt surface. Matteo’s hair had grown, and he had a sun-kissed glow on his face.

“Meet Casper,” he said. “He is dear friend, we grew up in next houses in Rattvik.”

The man standing next to Matteo was of average height, a little bulky in the shoulders. He had brown hair, hazel eyes and a tendency to squint that made him look sneaky, like a fox. He was pleasant looking, but with Matteo in the background even Robert Redford would look plain, washed out.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rose. Matti tells me you went to school in London?”

His English was beautiful and British. His voice, soft and authoritative, like a PBS broadcaster.

“Yes. I did my MBA at the London School of Economics.”

“Me too. But we barely had any Americans there,” Casper said.

“Americans prefer Oxford or Cambridge,” she smiled.

“Oh, beautiful and smart!” Casper exclaimed, as he turned to Matteo and gave him a smack on the head, like a father would to his thick-skulled son. “How could you lose a woman like that?”

As the two men rotated around the pool table, Casper talked about several businesses he had built in the UK and Europe. He was in America now meeting with venture capitalists to explore new opportunities.

What did they have in common? she
wondered. They were once boys running together in the Nordic countryside, Casper was a few years older, Matteo looked up to him as if he was an older brother, or a priest.

When Casper stood behind Rose teaching her the proper way to hold the cue stick, from the corner of her eye, she could see Matteo biting his nails. She felt beautiful, alluring, smart. They went to Valencia for dinner and ordered a family-sized platter of spaghetti and clams. They exchanged jokes, laughed, passed the salt, shared the sauce. She stared at the two men sitting across from her. She idolized Matteo’s beautiful face and she reveled in Casper’s radio voice, his sharp wit. She was on the best date of her life, facing her at this table was the perfect man—it just so happened it took two of them.

They moved to a nightclub a few blocks down Driftwood. Matteo jumped on Casper’s shoulders for a piggy ride on the street. They had drinks. Casper watched Rose and Matteo banter, reminisce about the past.

Like a couple’s therapist, he observed, “You guys have incredible chemistry together, love and hate, plus and minus, super smart and ultra st...” he stopped himself in time. “Tsunami!” he screamed. “You must have had great sex!”

“Yes, we had awesome sex life,” Matteo announced, grinning from ear to ear.

“You know it’s sad, tragic even, to brag about things you don’t have anymore,” Rose, a little tipsy, reminded her ex-lover.

She came home at five o’clock in the morning with an overwhelming feeling of joy. They called her at 5:15 to say they already missed her. She laughed and said she was not interested in a threesome. She hung up the phone and hugging her pillow, thought she missed them already too.

For the next two weeks she saw Casper daily. They had lunches in chic, cool cellars in the financial district where endless TV screens displayed the zigzags of the stock market. They went to the Museum of Flemish Art, attended author talks at the Cornell Club. They argued about the theory of 42 being the accurate answer to life, the universe and everything. She loved his encyclopedic knowledge, his crisp logical thinking, his vocabulary, his way with language. He opened doors, picked up tabs, adjusted her seat belt, never
Matteo called Rose from work to inquire how things were going with Casper.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked him.

"I want you be happy."

"And you suppose that Casper will make me happy?"

"Yes!" Matteo declared with conviction. "He is smart, rich. He is prince like you want."

"And what do you want?"

"I want everyone happy," he assured her, but she thought she heard a tremor in his voice, or maybe she just imagined it.

On the Fourth of July, Rose and Casper took The Fireworks cruise around the city harbor. Surrounded by tourists, they stood on deck as the skyline unrolled itself like a movie reel. She wore a white cotton dress that looked like a nightgown that could be slipped on and off over her head. Casper put his hand around her waist and they watched sparkling explosions in the sky. Afterward they went to Smorgas for supper. Matteo was working a wedding, running from kitchen to banquet. He barely had time to say hello. Rose observed the wedding table he was serving with a heavy heart...so they did host weddings at Smorgas! She asked Casper if Matteo was still seeing that woman he was in love with. Casper said he wasn't aware of any woman in his friend's life. He dropped her off at home before midnight, like a proper escort after a cotillion.

At four o'clock in the morning, Rose was asleep when the phone rang, it was Matteo, he was coming over, he hung up before she could even say a word. Trembling, she ran into the bathroom to brush her teeth. He came drunk, almost crawled in on his knees, clutching at her ankles, legs, hips, he tried to tell her he couldn't live without her. He picked her up, carried her to the bed, ripped open her nightgown, made love to her as if all of this was new. As the sun came up, he was sprawled out across her body, unconscious. She watched the pale blue curtains flapping in the wind. The 86th time they had made love, she noted to herself.

In the morning Matteo feigned surprise and, rubbing his temples, asked her, "How did I get here?" She slapped him across the face and threw
him out of her apartment.

Later that night she had dinner with Casper. She wore a cleavage-baring dress and he complimented her on a sexy, summer look. He knew. He had to. They were best friends since childhood—Matteo had been crashing on his hotel couch since the day Casper arrived. She asked Casper how long he was staying in town. He gave her a sultry smile, “Forever.” Maybe he didn’t know. Or he knew and didn’t show it. Or he knew and didn’t care. He kissed her good night in front of her building, just as her doorman put out the trash on the street. Matteo called after midnight and said he was coming over. At first she said no. Then she said yes.

She spent her days with Casper, he was the perfect daylight boyfriend, he had a special knack for listening, he valued her opinion. When he showed her a proposal for an enterprise he was considering, she took it to her firm and along with two other analysts, they crunched numbers to evaluate profit, loss and risk. But her nights were filled with frenzied passion in bed with Matteo, where hands and lips and limbs did their own kind of talking. He would wake up at 11:30 a.m., thirty minutes before his shift at Smorgas, and run around her bedroom looking for his socks, keys. Casper would pick her up at noon and whisk her away for brunch to some top-of-the-hill restaurant with breathtaking views and eggs benedict that could easily cost $180 and a parking ticket.

In early August, for absolutely no reason, Rose felt a sudden longing for Greece; the Aegean Sea was beckoning her with all its blueness of water and the white stones of The Acropolis. But who to bring on this romantic vacation? Matteo or Casper? The question haunted her without any resolution.

“So, you are not sleeping with Casper?” Maya asked, trying to grasp the complexity of this set-up.

“Maya, darling, don’t you get it?” Leonard mocked their naive friend. “This is one woman’s utopia! Everything is running like a well-oiled machine, each man has his own time slot and designated task.”

The two men also saw each other regularly; she heard them on the phone making plans—a spotting session at the gym, a fishing trip in the wee hours of morning, drinks in the after-hours bar. She wondered what they talked about during these male-bonding sessions.
It was sometime around Labor Day when the heat reached a colossal high and the peonies in the roof garden begun to suffocate. The air conditioner made a wheezing sound, coughed and died. She left a message for Casper asking if his overrated UK education included lessons in fixing air conditioners. As the temperatures rose in the afternoon, she sent Matteo an SOS text.

At three o’clock in the morning, the two men showed up on her doorstep together, a little drunk.

“You have to choose,” they said.

Like a respectable lady not used to nightly callers, Rose straightened her robe.

“Gentlemen,” she said, “I am going to go to the bathroom right now and wash my hair. When I return I want to see only one of you here. Who shall it be? You will decide between yourselves—like real men!”

“No don’t leave us, we’ll get into a fight!” Casper panicked.

“Oh, enough, I am tired, I go to sleep,” Matteo unbuckled his belt and headed for the bedroom.

“And that’s how it’s done,” Casper chuckled with sad irony, “in the cool, cold manner of a Viking.”

Rose came back from the linen closet with a set of sheets to make up the couch for Casper.

In the morning, Matteo was running laps in her apartment looking for his wallet. Casper and Rose helped him search. He left for work and they enjoyed a leisurely Sunday lunch, followed by sun-bathing and swimming on the beach, and lobsters on the promenade. When she walked into her building late that night, her doorman like a witness for the prosecution, gave her the look that said it all—order and chaos, two boys, taking the best from each one, greed, youth, and love that has every right to be insane because it’s love. She unlocked the door to her sweltering condo. In the kitchen she threw cold water on her face and shoulders, and she laughed, looking at her air conditioner that was still very broken.

The Indian summer propelled into October. One night, a completely drunk Matteo showed up at her condo and threw up all over the bathroom.
Mopping the floor in a black, lace lingerie she screamed, “You know next time when you get this drunk, don’t come here. I am not your maid, or your nurse!”

“Well, I am not some pretty boy you fuck when you want,” she heard him slur over the television.

Rose stopped in her tracks. She walked into the living room, where he lay on the couch with the air of entitlement. “And who is it that you would like to be?” She spoke very slowly. “My financial planner? My attorney? Oh, I know...my English teacher!” She knew she was being cruel, but she couldn’t stop herself. She told him to get out and forget her number.

The next evening, when Rose and Casper left the movie theater after watching *La Dolce Vita*, he asked her where she would like to go for dinner.

She snaked her hand into the loop of his arm and said, “How about we go back to your hotel, order room service and stay in for the night?”

He answered her with a seductive, victorious smile; a silent hunter whose prey had just crossed over to his side to sleep with him in the bushes.

They were already lying on the bed, drinking chilled champagne and munching on strawberries when Casper’s phone rang. He left the room to take the call. He returned seemingly upset. Another call. He left again. She heard him speaking Swedish, agitated at first, fired-up, then quiet, soothing, surrendering.

Rose sat up in bed, half-dressed. Casper returned to the bedroom and shaking his head, informed her, “I’m sorry. That was Matteo on the phone—he is upset about you being here...He threatened to bring a couple of hookers to make a party of it.”

“My God,” Rose sighed, buttoning up the blouse that was never quite taken off. “I’m going to go.”

“No, you can stay. He is not coming. A dog that barks doesn't bite...” he said, as he took his pillow and went out into the living room, slouched like an old man, his back heavy with defeat.

She fell asleep in Casper’s bed, on his 1000-thread count sheets, alone, listening to the screams of cats in love outside the window, and
thinking of Matteo’s rage.

In the morning, she slipped past the sleeping Casper on the couch. She left a note on his coffee table, a simple scribble—thank you for everything.

A week later, Rose walked into Smorgas in the middle of the afternoon wearing her corporate dress. She had never been inside the restaurant in the daytime. The sunlight fell on the tables illuminating the warm cherry wood finish and the display of apricots in oversized vases. There were a few customers inside—an elderly couple eating sandwiches, a young woman with a baby in a carriage. Matteo was standing by the bar, watching a soccer game on TV.

He approached her with polite hostility. “A table for two?” he sneered.

“No, just one,” she looked at him, like a mother who never stopped loving her spoiled son.

She sat down in the corner and ordered the Gravlax. She ate dreamily, concentrating on every bite, immersing herself in the adventure of taste and smell. She watched Matteo’s beautiful body in his charcoal gray uniform glide across the room, removing dishes and napkins. He was still angry when he presented the bill. She signed her name and added a large tip. She looked up, he was standing above her.

“I love you,” she said, slowly, sincerely, full of sadness.

She saw him gasp, step back in surprise, then relax, soften, give in, “I love you, too.”

Rose left the restaurant and walked home down Driftwood Drive. She already had the ticket in her pocketbook. Tonight she would board a plane that would take her to a ship on the Aegean Sea where she would be nothing but a dot in the ocean, a beautiful foreigner in a strange land, a woman without love or history of hunger. When she returned, there would be a message in the middle of the night—a drunken and obscure rant from Matteo, full of I love you’s and fuck you’s. There would be one from Casper left in the daylight—polite and subtle, with a few British innuendos. She would not return either call, then or ever.
311 Mint Avenue ~
McKenzie Hyde

The flowering rhododendron tree
and the way it barely swayed,
even in spring.
And the spring how it poured out

Rain like socks from a laundry basket.
And the rain, glossing the road for nine
straight months. A useless ice skating rink

or the shimmered maple leaning
this way and that, taller than the house,
taller than all of us. Keeping watch

And the leaves not caring
if we moved away, and we did
or the way it felt to climb up there
while the dogs shuffled anxiously

at the roots. And the roots,
holding it together

holding it in, unlike me
passing the house now, most
trees leveled and the remainder
lean forward,

waiting for me to speak.
Leaving Prince Albert ~

Robert Rickelman

I awoke at 5:00 a.m., Saturday, December 13th. I did not have the sixty dollars to pay for another week at the Prince Albert and would have to be gone by the 11:00 check-out time. I poured myself a tumbler of vodka, which I grasped with two trembling hands to prevent any spilling. I downed the entire thing and lay back, waiting for a sense of peace to wash over me. It didn’t take long until my jangled nerves settled.

I decided to have a final shower and shave. My tiny room had no bathroom. Everyone on the second floor shared one in common. It was poorly lit and reeked of urine and mildew. Thankfully, the lobby and hallway were empty. I walked the short distance to the bathroom, shaved quickly, showered in the grimy, foul-smelling stall, and returned to my room.

Being well-scrubbed and clean-shaven cheered me a bit. I filled another glass, which I was able to hold with one hand. The shakes were gone for the time being, but I knew they’d be back with a vengeance when the alcohol ran out.

It was almost eight. I would have this room for three more hours, then I’d be homeless. I was thirty-one years old, weak, skinny, and not cut out for this kind of life.

I lay back down and tried to nap, but I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t have any idea what I’d do once I left the Prince Albert. I drank the last three cans of beer, stared out the window, and tried to devise a strategy. I wondered who would be on duty when I finally checked out of the hotel. I hoped it wouldn’t be Frank. He was a big, tough, nasty-tempered man, and he scared the hell out of me.

Finishing the last beer gave me pause. Although I had an unopened fifth of vodka, and most of a pint, running out of beer was discouraging. So, I drained another glass and savored the burn.

Finally, the moment of truth arrived. It was eleven o’clock. I packed my duffle bag with a few possessions, including my booze. I wished I’d brought some warmer clothes, but I’d never anticipated ending up on the street.
I put an ear to the door, listening carefully, trying to determine who was working the desk, but I couldn't hear anything. I unzipped the bag and guzzled the last of the smaller bottle.

It was time to go. I opened the door and made a beeline for the exit. I didn't even see who was behind the desk. I rushed down the stairs and onto the street. No one followed me.

That was the end of my stay at the Prince Albert. I headed north toward Broadway. It was a gorgeous day, about 65 degrees. The sky was clear, and the sun shone brightly. This was the kind of weather that brought tourists to San Diego in the winter. I took a deep breath and counted my blessings.

The Prince Albert was located in the very seedy Gaslamp District, a neighborhood that had been run into the ground long ago. Because it was a Saturday I passed only homeless people and drifters, each a dirtier version of me.

As I roamed the neighborhood, I spotted a small grocery store, and with the money I had left, I bought a can of Spam. I asked the clerk for a plastic spoon, and he obliged me. I would save the Spam for dinner. I knew I'd have to eat something soon. I counted the change, which didn't take long. Seventy-five cents. That wouldn't buy much.

I wandered aimlessly among the dreary surroundings. It was almost 3:00. I figured that the Greyhound Station might be a suitable place for me to hang out, try to be invisible.

I reached the station, opened the door, and proceeded to the restroom. I ducked into a stall and latched the door. I opened the bag and retrieved the last fifth. I gulped down a large amount, knowing that I would need a considerable buzz to get through my first night on the street. I put the bottle back in the bag.

Feeling fortified, I left the restroom and found a seat in the waiting area. I tried not to draw any attention to myself. I was clean and hadn't yet acquired the disheveled look of a homeless person. But within a few minutes, a security guard asked to see my ticket. Since I had nothing to show, he told me to leave the building. I did.

By 5:00 p.m., it was growing dark. With the sunset, the temperature dropped quickly. I regretted not having at least a light jacket or sweater and anticipated a long night ahead. I trudged up and
down Broadway, trying in vain to stay warm, but
the cold was getting the better of me.

By about seven, I spotted a small crowd milling
around outside the station. A man and woman,
probably in their mid-thirties, approached me, and
the man struck up a conversation.

“It’s gonna be a cold one tonight.”

“Yup,” I answered.

“Don’t you have a coat or something warm to wear?”

“I’m counting on the vodka to keep me warm.”

“Vodka? What? Are you an alcoholic or
something?”

“Yeah, I am. No way I could do this without the
booze.”

“Me and the wife never touch the stuff. So, you
drink every day or what?”

Me and the wife? This guy didn’t have a clue.

“Alcohol affects the judgment. You have to have
your wits about you to make it on the streets,” he
said.

“I’ll take my chances.”

He was beginning to annoy me, so I turned away.

People came and went. Around ten, a police cruiser
rolled by, and a cop told us that this was a no
loitering zone, get moving.

I didn’t know where to go, but I left the area. I
thought of letting the cops arrest me. At least a jail
cell would be warm. But I did not want to lose the
alcohol, so I quickly dismissed that notion.

I ducked behind a garbage dumpster, pulled out
the fifth and guzzled some more. I screwed the cap
back on and headed to where most of the people
were gathered. I was very hungry.

I opened the bag and retrieved a square can of
Spam. The metal lid reminded me of the top
of a sardine can. I opened the lid and peeled it
off. Above the meat was a layer of a cold, gooey
gelatinous substance. I was so hungry that I
scooped it up and ate it. It was surprisingly tasty.
Once I’d eaten the gooey layer, the meat didn’t look
at all bad. I was very hungry and ready for dinner.

As I was about to dig in, I was approached by a wiry
black guy, about my height, six feet, give or take, wearing a very worn and dirty, green army jacket. Something about him made me anxious.

“Hey, man, I sure could use some of that Spam,” he said.

“Sorry, this is lunch and dinner. I don’t have any extra.”

“C’mon, bro. I am famished. I haven’t eaten in two days. Don’t you wanna share any of that?”

I was glad to have the vodka in me. It gave me the courage to deal with his badgering.

“I said no. I barely have enough to feed myself, and I only have one spoon.”

I was being truthful. The can was small, seven ounces to be exact.

“One spoon. What’s that supposed to mean? You don’t want no Negro germs on your spoon? You too good to share your food with a brother?”

“Listen,” I said as calmly as possible, “if I had more, I would share it, but this is all I have, and I’m not sharing it with anyone.”

“That’s cold blooded. You got plenty in that can. You got to share with the people on the street. We’re all family, bro.”

I wondered if he was going to try to take the Spam from me. I didn’t know what I would do in that instance.

I decided not to say anything else. I couldn’t reason with him. Maybe I was being selfish, but I was so hungry, and the can wasn’t very big. I started eating faster, spooning it into my mouth. I had wanted to enjoy this meal, but now I felt I needed to finish it as quickly as possible.

The guy finally tired of waiting and moved on. He left me with a bit of unsolicited advice.

“You’re one selfish mother. You’ll get yours, man. Sooner or later you be hungry and won’t nobody share their food with you. You can’t be that way on the street. You need to make friends out here. You don’t need no enemies.”

I said nothing, and he finally walked off, disgruntled and hungry.

I savored the last few spoonfuls, eating them slowly. I was thankful that the guy had gone away without
any incident.

I finished the can and threw it in the trash. I wiped the spoon clean and kept it, just in case. I went off by myself to enjoy a couple swigs.

As the night wore on, I continued taking intermittent drinks. Just before midnight I finished the last of the fifth, the last of my booze.

By 1:00 a.m., everyone had disappeared. I headed off, without a destination, pondering a very bleak future.

As I ventured south of Broadway, I heard someone calling to me. I turned around and spotted a young guy. He was wrapped in a surprisingly clean, navy blue, hooded parka that was in remarkably fine condition. He was also wearing a large, sturdy backpack that looked pretty well stuffed.

“Hey, dude, what’s up? Ya want some company? It’s not too safe down here at night.”

“Hey,” I said. “Yeah, I guess it’s not too safe. Sure, I could use the company. It’s pretty lonely out here.”

He smiled. He was just a kid, no older than twenty-one, twenty-two. We were standing in an empty parking lot. I noticed that the building that bordered the lot was the Prince Albert. We were at the back of the hotel looking at the very rickety fire escape. I was pretty sure I could locate the window of the room I had been renting. A wave of something resembling nostalgia swept over me. Life at the Prince Albert was an obviously superior alternative to managing on the street.

“Name’s Eric.”

We shook hands.

“I’m Rob. Nice to find a friendly face.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean, but you can’t be too trusting. Lots of bad folks out here. How long you been on the streets?”

“This is my first night. I don’t know how people can do this.”

“Well, it beats the shelters, at least as far as I’m concerned.”

“Does it?” I asked. “I was seriously considering checking one out. What don’t you like about them?”

“Well, first off, they stink. Either B.O. or
disinfectant, take your pick. And most of the people are pretty sketchy. Always looking for an angle or with a favor to ask. But probably the number one reason that I avoid the shelters is that they don’t let you in if you’ve been drinking, and I need to be drunk 24/7. My body needs the alcohol. No joke.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. I can’t stop either. I don’t know what I’ll do now that the money’s gone. I was staying right up there.”

I pointed toward a dark window.

He laughed.

“The Prince Albert. Yeah, I’ve been there. Quite the palace. Is Frank still running the desk?”

I smiled and nodded.

“Yeah, old Frank, he’s quite the prince his own self, isn’t he?”

“You, swell guy. I’ll miss him,” I said.

I checked my watch, it was 1:45.

“Got somewhere to go?”

“No, I just like to keep track of time. No reason.”

“Not to change the subject, but I’ve got a little something to warm the cockles of your heart.”

He unzipped his pack and pulled out a bottle.

I smiled widely.

“T-bird,” I said.

“Good old American bum wine. Screw-cap. Guaranteed to cure what ails you.”

I chugged some and shuddered. It tasted like fruit-flavored kerosene. Still, I knew this would help me maintain the buzz that had started to slip away. I passed it back to Eric.

“Some pretty harsh shit. But ya can’t beat the price. Buck-fifty a pop.”

He gulped some down, grimaced and puckered his lips. He placed it on the ground.

“So, you wanna kill this shit or milk it?” he asked.

I laughed. “Let’s kill it.”

“Yeah, let’s kill this bad bird.”

He took a long draw and passed me the wine.
It wasn’t long before the T-Bird lay empty on the ground. This shit knocked me on my ass. I was extremely inebriated and very dizzy. I could see that Eric was enjoying the same effects.

Despite my intoxicated state, I started to tremble. It was cold, probably forty-something.

“Dude, don’t you have anything warm to wear?”

“No,” I said, “I didn’t think I would wind up on the streets.”

Once again, he reached into his backpack, and presented me with a worn and soiled, pinkish-colored *Members Only* jacket and a thread bare, ratty gray sweatshirt. I accepted them gratefully, and immediately put on the sweatshirt first, then the jacket. I was still cold, but this was a big improvement over what I was wearing.

“Wow, thanks, man. You don’t know what a difference this makes. By the way, I really like your coat. I’m not asking for it or anything, but how’d you get it?”

“I showed up at the Sally at just the right time.”

He was referring to the Salvation Army. That was the place to go for shoes, clothes, food, and if you didn’t mind the praying, a cot for the night. Eric had scored himself a very nice coat.

“Yeah, you oughta check it out. See if you can get something warm. Goodwill and the Sally run thrift shops too. I bought these boots at the Goodwill. Pretty nice, huh?”

He motioned to his boots. He was sporting what looked like a brand new pair of top quality hiking boots.

“Very nice,” I said.

“I love these boots. Only cost me ten bucks. They probably go for over a hundred bucks retail.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, how do you get the money to pay for stuff? You know, shoes, clothes, food, booze.”

“No, I don’t mind. I’m glad you asked. You’ve got to know where to go to survive in San Diego, especially in the winter. I go to churches and other places for sandwiches, soup sometimes. If you stay the night at the shelters they give you supper and breakfast. But, like I said, I try to steer clear of the shelters.
“My main source of income comes from selling plasma. There are a few places that pay for it. I like to use this clinic in El Cajon. It’s nicer than the rest of them.”

“What kind of money can you make selling your plasma?”

“Well, they all pay about the same. Twenty-five bucks for the first time you donate. The first time’s a hassle. They do a quick physical, blood test for AIDS and hepatitis, and they give you a piss test. It takes about two hours. After that, you can donate twice a week. They give you twelve bucks the first time and fifteen bucks the second time. So, what’s that, um, twenty-seven a week. If I’m careful, it pays for my alcohol and some food.”

“But what if you’ve been drinking? Do they still let you donate?”

“If they smell booze on you, they won’t let you donate, and you’ll have to come another day with no booze on your breath. I don’t drink on the mornings I sell my plasma. The place where I go opens at 7:00, so I get there early, before I start coming down too hard. If you’re shaky, and your pulse is over 100, or if your blood pressure is way up, they’ll tell you to come back a different day. Sucks when that happens, so I’m pretty careful about getting in and out early.”

“Man, I don’t know if I could stop long enough to go through all the tests and shit. I get really shaky when I don’t drink.”

“Yeah, I feel for you, bro. I know how bad the jonesing can be. Another way to get some money is to panhandle, you know, fly a sign. ‘Will work for food. God Bless.’ You know, the stuff guys write on their cardboard. I don’t like flying a sign, but when I’m really desperate I’ll hit people up for spare change. Most people get scared off or hostile when you ask them for money. You gotta have a really thick skin, or be really hammered, to panhandle.”

“Yeah, I think I’d have to be pretty wasted to do that. If I’m crashing, there’s no way I could do it.”

“Yeah, alcoholism is hell. But, how to quit? I have no idea.”

“I don’t think I can quit.”

He laughed. “I don’t think I want to quit. Truth be told.”
“So,” he asked, “where do you plan on spending the rest of the night?”

I remembered that I had left the Prince Albert without turning in my key. With the high I had working for me, I was bravely considering using my key to spend this cold early morning in my old room. The key not only worked on my room door, it also opened the door for the main entrance.

“Man, I should have thought of this earlier. I still have my key to the Prince Albert. Think I’ll sneak upstairs for the night and duck out quick before it gets light. I’m not hitting on you or anything, but you’re welcome to use the room too.”

He was quiet for a minute. Probably trying to figure out if I was gay or straight.

“You know what? Yeah that sounds cool. I haven’t slept indoors in I don’t know how long. And you are straight, right?”

“Swear to God.”

“Well, my man, what are we waiting for? Let’s book us a room at the Prince Albert.”

We both laughed. It felt good. It had been a long time, but I trusted this guy. There was just something about him that was very non-threatening. We headed out of the parking lot and around the corner to the entrance of the hotel.

“Ready?” I asked. I reached into my pocket and pulled out the hotel key.

“Yeah. Nobody’s gonna be at the desk at two in the morning. Especially not Frank. Let’s do it.”

We climbed the cement steps to the front entrance. I slipped in the key and unlocked the door. We were in. I unlocked another door, and we crept up the stairs to the second floor. My old floor.

“Man, this is easy,” Eric whispered.

“Yeah, c’mon. Let’s go. My room’s right here. Number 21.”

“Shit,” Eric said, “what if somebody is staying in your room?”

“Then I guess we’ll have to get the hell out of here. Quick.”

“Screw it,” he said, “let’s just do this. I’m drunk, and I’m tired.”
I slowly, quietly slid in the key, and opened the door. The room was dark. We hustled in and I flipped on the light switch. Thank God, the room was empty. I quickly locked the door behind us.

He looked at the bed. It was a twin size, no room for two.

“Um. Bed’s a little small.”

“You can have the bed,” I said. “I’ll sleep on the floor.”

“No, man, that’s okay. After all, it’s your bed.”

“Used to be. It’s not mine anymore. Really, you can have the bed. You’ve already shared your wine and given me warm clothes. You deserve it.”

“Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll take the floor and I get the pillow. I’m used to sleeping on the ground, but I have to admit, a pillow sure would be nice.”

“It’s a deal,” I said. “You can have one of the blankets too.”

“Okay. Sounds like a plan.”

Eric sat on a chair and took off his boots and socks. He placed them under the old desk. He found a spot on the floor and lay down, wrapped in an old brown flannel blanket, his head resting comfortably on the pillow.

“Ahhh...man. It’s been a while since I slept in such comfortable digs.”

“Happy to accommodate you,” I said.

I checked my watch one last time. It was almost 3:00 a.m. I fell quickly to sleep. I’m pretty sure Eric did as well.

I slept soundly. The T-Bird was doing its job. I slept through the sunrise until I awoke to a rather loud conversation just outside my door. I wondered if Frank or one of the other desk clerks was aware that I had been sleeping in my old room. I felt deeply anxious. I looked at my hands. They were starting to shake.

I wondered if Eric was awake too, and was surprised to see that he was not in the room. I thought that he might have gone to use the restroom. Maybe that was what the noise was about. Maybe he got caught sneaking around the second floor. But the room key was still on the nightstand, and the pillow and blanket he’d used were back on the bed. In
fact, he'd covered me with the blanket.

I looked at the time, 8:30. Jeez. I'd planned on waking up before seven. I sat upright on the bed trying to hear the exchange outside my room. The talking had grown quieter and the voices more relaxed.

I checked the pockets of my jeans. The 75¢ was still there. I was relieved. I had enough to buy a 16-ounce can of beer. Not much, but better than nothing.

Then, to my complete amazement, I spied an unopened pint of vodka nestled securely on top of the dresser. I sprung out of bed, not believing my luck.

Under the bottle was a scrap of brown paper with a message written on it. I picked up the note. The writing was hard to read, but I was able to make it out.

It said:

“Good morning, Rob. Thought you could use an eye-opener. This ought to help. Enjoy your day and stay safe. Thanks for sharing your room.

Peace, Eric.”

Wow, this guy was something else. He knew what I was going through, because, sadly, he was a fellow drunk. I wondered if I'd ever get the opportunity to thank him. In any event, I was sure he had Karma on his side. I hoped his situation would improve and that he would find a way off the streets. He was a young guy, and he still had a chance.

I wondered what time Eric had left. I guessed he didn't want to get caught by Frank, who probably would have broken his neck. I didn't even know if he used the door or the window. I figured if he left early enough, while it was still dark, he'd have gone out through the lobby. If he heard the same voices I did, he probably used the fire escape.

I went to the sink, splashed some water on my face and sipped some from the faucet.

Now I needed an exit plan. No, I needed an escape plan. How the hell was I going to get out of here without being waylaid by Frank?

I looked out the window. The fire escape platform was right outside. But the stairs were barely attached to the wall, and I couldn't even spot a ladder. If I didn't want a broken leg, I'd have to go
out the front.

I decided to get dressed and ready before I opened this unexpected gift. I put on my pants and the sweatshirt and jacket. I grabbed the bottle with both hands and held it to my nose, inhaling my medicine’s pungent, but soothing, aroma. I sat on the bed and put the pint to my lips, tilted it, and guzzled it down. My throat burned raw, but I welcomed the pain.

I sat on the bed and waited for the warm cloak of composure to envelop me. Within minutes, I was feeling much better. It was time to go.

I knew that the fire escape was not a safe bet for me. I’d have to go out the front. I approached the door. There was still some sort of discussion taking place, pretty loud, maybe angry. Yeah, I could distinguish Frank’s strong, bellicose voice. Not what I wanted to hear.

I was feeling very high, and knew I wouldn’t get any drunker, so now was the time to make my escape. I thought my pounding heart was going to burst. I took some slow, deep breaths, opened the door and dashed to the staircase. I could see Frank off to the side. He immediately started yelling.

“Hey, you mother-fucking, low-life piece of shit ...”

I was already running madly down the stairs and was quickly out the door and down to the street. I kept running until I was almost to Broadway, a few blocks away. I wondered if Frank would call the cops, or worse, try to find me. I dropped the key in a trash can and slowed my pace to a casual gait.
Doc Masters’ Dog ~
*R.F McEwen*

Walked past your house last night...it stood so dark against a nearly moonless sky. Your room was dark, the curtains taut, a sail-cloth white... if they’d been rounded they’d appeared almost a brace of wide, unblinking eyes, so like your own when you were telling me about the way Doc Masters drew his telling of your troubles out.

“Why would he dawdle on like that?” you asked, and I could but surmise he’d never let his bitterness dissolve but fed it like he would a raving dog he kept for rats.

So many of us knew (though, obviously, you had never guessed) about the great, heart-breaking past between your mother and Doc Masters when the two were parted by her mother’s lies near on the same gray day your parents said their vows.

You’d think he’d... well. But then your father died a hero’s pointless death in Vietnam and Doc retreated. How could he annul the workings of a hero’s death? What light, what tenderness could penetrate a heart interred before its time, one wedded to the night?

Then afterwards, when she became the story of La Claire, Doc Masters went
to tossing buckets full of wormy jowl
to keep the hound both whetted and insane;
I’m not the only one who could’ve said . . .
there were others more informed could’ve explained.
The priest, Conway. Perhaps your uncle Phil
after he moved to Kansas could’ve sent
the timely word before your nagging cough
became entirely a different voice,
and you thought Doctor Masters was the one
to catch the tune and silence it for good.

And you, your eyes were wider that he’d drawn
it out than at the words themselves. You said
he’d kept your hand in his and touched your cheek.
It’s hard to think three years are nearly gone
and still I pass your vacant house at night
then loiter for a bit below the light
(though now those Toomey boys have shot it out
for what must be the thirteenth time). No luck,
I guess, for street lights or for faithless friends.
Trust Not the Dawns

Nina Murray

“Now guard the beaches,
watch the north, trust not the dawns.”
– Robinson Jeffers

a four-a.m. run to the airport
I must be the driver’s first fare
so he begins to recite the company’s greeting
softly in the dark orb of the car
wishing me a good morning
a happy belated unity day
resilient health fulfillment in personal life
and to all of us he says
a peaceful blue sky above our heads

which is when I resolve not to tip him
for this blithe cold-war formula
his rehearsed invocation of threat
while it is I who must recall
an early spring night in a country that borders his
when I lay listening for the dive of invisible jets
the distant rumble of rocket launchers
a small body    shivering because I knew
how open it was—the window of opportunity:
deterrence the sound of me swallowing hard
and the steady drift of rain on the window

same to you is what I actually said
he signaled diligently before changing lanes
Alligator Blood ~

Alyssa Striplin

When Lucy came to the closet for afternoon tea, Bruce licked the clear membrane covering his eyes, scratched his belly with his claws, and wondered if he had been awake or asleep. She quietly shut the door and pulled the plywood table to the center of the room.

“Guess what day it is,” she whispered. He crawled over to join her, his scales scraping against the concrete floor.

“I never know what day it is.” Bruce could only keep track of the days when Lucy came for tea.

“It’s my birthday!” She bounced when she spoke; Bruce had to curl his tail around his feet to keep her from stepping on it. “I’m seven years old now.”

“Happy Birthday,” he yawned. Rows of serrated teeth glistened in the light of the candle she held in her hands. She used it to light the others scattered about the small, triangular closet underneath the stairs. Her body floated through the candlelight, flitting about the boxes of moldy books and dusty clothing until the entire room shimmered in a warm glow. Bruce sat with shoulders hunched, spikes bristling against the wood above him, waiting for her to set the table.

“I got us a special tea set to use today,” she said.

A thin, forked tongue slithered from Bruce’s gullet and licked his scaly lips. He thought it odd that he found himself thirsty, even though the tea was imaginary, and he had learned long ago that he did not need to eat or drink. The cups and plates were all for show, but it was the only show Bruce knew.

Lucy rummaged through her Hello Kitty backpack. She pulled out a wad of newspaper and unwrapped a tea cup like an ice cream sandwich on a hot summer day. It was bone white in the candlelight with a golden scroll around the edges. She set it down, moving on to produce matching saucers, spoons, and a teapot. Her arms reached across the table to pour their tea, still humming. Bruce snatched an invisible crumpet from the plate and tossed it into the air, gobbling it up with a snap of his jaw. The little girl wrinkled her nose.
“Manners,” she said. “You weren’t born in a barn.”

He pretended to lick a few crumbs from the tips of his claws, “How would I know? You’ve never told me.”

She yanked the plate away from him, “You were born in Poughkeepsie.”

“Is that a real place? Or are you just saying that because it has the word ‘poo’ in it?”

Lucy giggled into her little hands, confirming his suspicions. “Is that some kind of swamp?”

“It wasn’t a swamp,” she said. “It was a pond in the backyard of the old house we used to live in with Daddy.”

“Where is your daddy now?”

“Heaven,” she said. Bruce was too proud to ask where that was. Lucy liked to tease him for not knowing things. “I found your egg in a nest by a pond,” she continued. “The biggest I’d ever seen.” She held her hands out wide, trying to show him, but it was as if her arms were not long enough to capture the size.

Bruce nodded, having always assumed he came from an egg. Lucy told him as much, when she would stay after tea to read to him from the encyclopedias stacked against the back wall of the closet. When they finished the collection for the third time, A-Z, she told stories from the movies her dad let her watch—movies about kings, kongs, zillas, moths, and more. Other times, she brought newspapers and magazines from school or her therapist’s office. From these, Bruce learned a lot about the world outside the closet. Recently, all the headlines had been about dying reefs, a war overseas, terrorist attacks, and nuclear weapons. He preferred to keep up with sports.

“Did the Royals win the World Series?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Lucy said. “Johnathan takes Mommy to the games without me. She says kids can’t go on dates.” She stood and ran to the door, “I’ll go find a newspaper. Be right back.”

“Wait,” Bruce said. The door was already cracked, and a white line of light separated Lucy from him; he felt himself shrink back into the shadows. “Let’s search the newspapers in here first,” he said. “Perhaps I missed it.”
Lucy lingered by the door. He watched small motes of dust settle into the pleats of her skirt—blue plaid and bright red shoes. Bruce memorized her clothes every chance he got. There were times, in the past, when she would leave for the restroom only to return in a different outfit. If they had been in the middle of a conversation, she would forget and begin talking about her day as if one had passed during her absence.

Finally, she shut the door and skipped over to a box of newspapers near the door. Bruce watched her dig to find the freshest print. She slapped it on the ground beside him. In the center of the page was a picture of a city surrounded by a sea of blue and white waves pouring in and out of every door, window, and street.

“Was there a flood?”

“No,” Lucy said. “Those are people. Can’t you see? It’s a parade! I think we won!”

Bruce leaned down closer but could not see anything more than the swarm of color. “I don’t see any people.”

Lucy’s shoes clattered on the concrete. She scooped up a candle and brought it towards the picture, but she tripped over his tail. The candle fell from her hands and splattered hot wax all over the newspaper.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “Don’t be mad. I’m sorry.” The wick of the candle still burned and rolled near Bruce’s foot. The tiny flame shimmered against his scales.

Bruce flinched too, but felt nothing. “Are you ok?”

Lucy inhaled loudly, “You’re fireproof. Just like dragons in the storybook.”

“Maybe I am a dragon,” he sounded hopeful.

“Dragons aren’t real.”

“There are Komodo dragons in Indonesia,” he said.

“Oh right. Where is that?”

He shrugged.

“Do Komodo dragons breathe fire?”

“No,” he said, “but their saliva is filled with bacteria that dissolves meat.”
She stuck out her tongue and made a gagging noise.

“Maybe I can breathe fire.” He opened his mouth and huffed. No fire, only warm spit. Bruce wiped his snout. “If I’m not a dragon, then what am I?”

She poked at her cheeks, thinking. “I think you’re a mutt.”

Bruce scratched his head.

“That’s what Daddy used to say about me,” she said. “I have lots of different blood mixed up inside.”

“What’s in my blood?”

“Lots of stuff,” she counted them out on her fingers. “T-rex, iguana, gorilla, alligator, whale...”

“I am not a whale,” Bruce growled. He had seen these creatures in the encyclopedia before and had instantly disliked them.

“Yes, you are,” Lucy said. She had returned to the table. Her pinky struggled to stay straight as she took a sip of tea. “How else would you get so big?”

Bruce had no answer, so he picked up the newspaper from the floor and examined the picture again. He had trouble imagining all these blue and white specks as people, mostly because he could not imagine how many people there were in the world. Lucy was the only person he had ever met. “Where is your mother?” he asked.

She shrugged. Bruce peeked over the newspaper and saw Lucy swirling her finger around the rim of her tea cup, staring into vacant porcelain.

“Is she with the Johnathan?”

Silence. Lucy was holding her hands now, digging a nail into the soft pink flesh on the back of her hand. Her legs were bouncing under the table—anxious. Did she want to leave?

“We could play dress up,” Bruce said. “Don’t you want to look nice for your birthday party?”

Lucy blinked. Her body loosened and she smiled. She jumped up and squeezed herself behind him, opened a musty box, and rifled through the clothes inside. Shirts, belts, hats, and a dusty jacket covered in medals that jingled began to pile up around her feet. Bruce noticed that these clothes
were far too big for Lucy. She found a leather case at the bottom of the box and brought it to the table. Inside was a pair of metal-rimmed glasses with thick, round lenses.

“Put these on,” she said. “These were Daddy’s reading glasses. You can pretend to be mad that I’m taking so long to get ready.”

Bruce gingerly held the glasses in front of his eyes with his claws. “I don’t think they will fit,” he said. “My eyes are too far apart.”

Lucy was not listening. She had moved on to another box full of summer dresses and jewelry.

“I have to look my best,” she said. “The president will be at the party and I want to shake his hand!” Bruce balanced the glasses on his snout. The lenses were small, but if he squinted, he could see through them. He picked up the newspaper again and pretended to read. To his surprise, he began to see faces populate the streets on the front page. Lucy shuffled back to the table wearing enormous red high-heels and a rose print dress draped around her tiny frame. She had a gold tube of lipstick in her hand that she rubbed clumsily onto her lips. “How do I look?” she asked, “Am I a pretty lady?”

Bruce thought she looked more like a tangled-up curtain rod, but he did not say so. “As pretty as your mother.”

Lucy frowned. “Mommy says I look more like Daddy.”

“Is that a bad thing?” he asked.

She looked down at her feet. “It’s unfortunate for little girls to look like their fathers instead of their mothers.” She spoke, but the words did not sound like her own.

“What did your father look like?”

“He had black hair like me,” Lucy said, “and he wore those glasses a lot because he was always reading. He sometimes forgot to take them off. And he was really tall. Probably as tall as you, only thinner. But he was so strong. He could pick me up and toss me in the air and I wouldn’t ever be afraid because I knew he would catch me.” Bruce liked the way she described her father. He felt proud to be wearing the man’s glasses.

“You don’t wear glasses, though,” he said.

“Johnathan says I’ll probably need glasses for
my cock eye,” she said the spoke quietly, rubbing a fist into her left eye.

“What does he know?” Bruce asked. “Maybe you have lizard eyes. Like me.”

She smiled and showed tiny, rounded teeth, “You really think so?”

He nodded; the glasses slipped off his snout. He tried to grab them, but they were so small. Instead, his slender tongue flickered past his lips and circled around the wire frame. Secured, he slurped his tongue back into his mouth—glasses and all. He could feel them between his teeth and, reflexively, his jaw snapped shut with a loud crunch. Lucy screamed.

He spat the powdered glass and wire frames out onto the table. “It was an accident.”

Lucy swept the broken glasses into her hands and sniffled. Bruce leaned over the table, wanting to stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks. He did not feel the teapot crack and crumble beneath his armored belly.

“Mommy’s special china!” Lucy cried. She dropped the glasses on the floor and her breath became sporadic, almost as if she had hiccups. “Oh no, no, no, no…”

“It’s OK,” Bruce said. “It wasn’t your fault.”

She began to cry more shrilly, her hands shaking. She tried to pick up teapot pieces and put them back together. He could barely hear what she was saying. All he could make out was, “I’m sorry… Please don’t tell Johnathan…” When the teapot refused to come back together, Lucy wrapped her arms around herself and let her fingers dig into her skin. Bruce asked her to stop, but she didn’t listen. “Please don’t…” she cried. “It’s my birthday…I’m sorry…”

The sound of a door opening outside the closet made her stop. Her eyes widened. Footsteps moved on hardwood floors. Lucy scurried to the corner and hid beneath the pile of men’s clothes. The footsteps were heavy. They moved past the closet door. Bruce’s spines stood up straight and a hiss crawled up his throat. He slid over to the corner and tried to nudge Lucy out from under the clothes with his snout.

“It’s OK,” he said. “It was my fault. Tell your mother it was me.” He heard her whimper and the
pile of clothes rocked a little as she shook her head. The footsteps were farther away from the closet now. “Don’t be scared,” he said. “I’m here.”

“No, you’re not,” she cried.

Bruce chuckled. “Where else would I be?” He motioned toward the table, the books, the piles of clothes. “This is where I live.”

Lucy shook her head. “Only since Daddy went to Heaven.”

He didn’t understand. Most of the candles had burnt out, but two remained, flickering on the table. Just enough light for Bruce to see her face—as white as the broken bits of china scattered on the floor.

“Who says that?”

“Mommy,” she whispered. Her fingers were tugging at a strand of her hair.

“How would she know? Has she ever seen me?”

She shook her head, “She can’t. You’re like a dragon. Not the Komodo ones.”

“I am not a dragon. You said so,” he counted his lineage out on his claws. “I’m an alligator and a whale…”

“No one else can see you,” she said.

“But you can, right?”

The footsteps were returning faintly. Lucy looked at the door. “I shouldn’t be here,” she said. “You can’t help me.”

“Yes, I can.” He tried to move closer, but she crawled away. “Look at me.”

“I have to go.”

Bruce moved into her line of sight. “You see me, don’t you?”

She looked through him. “I’ve seen dragons too…”

“I’m not a dragon, I’m alive.” His voice was nearly caught in a snarl. “Lucy, please…”. The footsteps had turned and moved in another direction. “Just look at me,” he pleaded. She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“LOOK AT ME.”
The roar rose savagely from his throat as he thrashed his tail and slammed his claws into the ground. He bellowed so loudly that he didn’t hear Lucy cry. She crawled to the closet door and gripped the handle, her body shaking as if she would fall to pieces. Bruce let his body shrink into the shadows, under the pile of forgotten clothing. He felt the urge to touch her; to pick her up and cradle her in his arms; to carry her into a calm sea of blue and white waves that would surround her and keep her safe. When he reached out to touch her, he saw his claws. He held them closer to his eyes as if he were seeing them for the first time.

“Who…” the word caught in his gullet. “What am I supposed to be?”

Before Lucy could answer, a woman’s voice called out, “Lucy! Lucy, where are you?” She stood up quickly and shed the dress and high-heels. Her hands snatched up her backpack and tried to pick up her shoes, but she only managed to grasp one. She didn’t dare look at Bruce, but he knew that her eyes were as red as the shoe she left behind.

“Lucy?” His voice was quieter now, almost human. “When will you come back?”

She turned the handle and let a ray of light cut through the darkness; a gust of air snuffing out the remaining candles. Bruce’s eyes struggled to adjust. He heard her footsteps rush out of the closet and into the world beyond. Before the sound of Lucy had nearly disappeared, his vision became clearer and he could see the door was open a crack. He crawled forward, peeking out into a long corridor. There were dozens of pictures and frames on the wall across from him. Bruce had to squint to see them. One photo was of a woman and a man with round glasses standing with a little girl by a small pond. In the little girl’s hand was a small, blue-green egg. Another photo showed the same man and little girl wearing blue and white clothing as they sat in the bleachers of a stadium. The little girl’s face was covered in ice cream and Bruce could see the man’s eyes smile through the thick lenses of his glasses. He stared at this photo the longest, and in the glass, he could faintly see the closet door mirrored back. What color are my eyes, he wondered. But the door banged shut before he could find an answer and Bruce was left alone in the dark with no reflection.
You Cattle-Thieving Son-of-a-bitch ~

Hart L’Ecuyer

Americans are still playing host to a mob from Brisbee; numerous miners became state capitals. Barkeeper Boyle testified that the two men came not from Charleston but from breakfast. Clean getaways, great columns of smoke, codes of silence: very leisurely. Carrying Winchester rifles the two men stopped to enjoy an evening meal. A posse of vengeful cowboys assassinated the most liberal & kind-hearted man I have ever met.

Consciously, sunrise reached the railroad town & during a confrontation the marshal gave a detailed statement to keep the peace.

A long, prepared statement. Now, since the evidence lacks good social standing, law & order will have to get rid of the six-shooter. Immediately on the heels of a lumber dealer, you relieved the Arizona-Mexico border of $593, you cattle thieving son-of-a-bitch.
Scoop Me Out Like an Oyster ~

*Maddie Murphy*

The casino flashes
An acid burn below
The lower curve
Of my eye socket.
Deep itching, she repeats,
Frantic digging,
A fork and no relief.
Cerulean twinkle
I want to hold the heat on my tongue,
Crush and swallow the artifice.
The false hope
Of mercury healing on my shin,
A lack of recognition.

I watch her catch on a license plate,
Cartwheeling on the truck-bumper,
Eyes-rolled tongue out-
It’s beautiful.
Spilled out in the right lane,
She heaves.
We do too.

Lost on the back road
The airport periphery
Blue stars litter the ground.
Before me: blackness,
The geese ee-eek, chkachka,
I sob at their taunting.

Reach through my breastbone, please,
It’s just hand in current,
I feel nothing.
My soul fell,
It lives in the tent-top of my stomach
Scoop it like an oyster.
Pavlov’s Dog ~

Gregory J. Wolos

Three years ago, when Ginger and I first brought our puppies home from the shelter, we’d already picked two names, though we didn’t assign them immediately. Our plan was to call whichever one proved to be less well-behaved “Bark” and the better dog “Bite.” Then we could tell people that “Bark is worse than Bite.” During our dozen years together, we’d been the kind of couple who’d take on the burden of dog ownership just for a punch line. Bark earned his “worse dog” title because he took longer than Bite to be housebroken. But, as it turned out, we named them too quickly: when the dogs matured into their actual personalities, Bark had a gentle temperament, while Bite was sour and threatening. Overall, Bite was much worse than Bark. We wound up calling the disappointingly literal pair Barky and Bitey.

Our first stop after a long-weekend trip to the Bahamas was to the veterinarian’s to pick up our boarded pets. Despite the blue sky, warm sun, azure sea and white beaches, the mini-vacation had failed in its purpose; we left our resort with the issue of Ginger’s surprise pregnancy unsettled. The window for taking action was closing, but we’d been unable to force ourselves to broach the subject.

Children had never been part of our plans; the dogs, I thought we’d agreed, were enough family for any couple. At the resort, Ginger treated herself to spa time while I hid behind a book on the beach. At meals, in bed, even on the flight home, we mumbled over neutral topics, while our glances slid apart like magnets of the same pole. I drank heavily, while I took Ginger’s avoidance of alcohol to be a contingency rather than a decision.

It was still morning as we stepped into the veterinary clinic—we’d escaped the island on the earliest possible flight. It struck me that we’d reached a crisis point. “So?” My hushed voice echoed off the tile floor.

“Here?” Ginger hissed. “Now?” She reached toward me as if I’d stumbled, though I hadn’t moved, then dropped her arm and shook her head. “The pups are waiting.”
“They’ll be happy to see us,” I grumbled, and stuck my hands in my pockets.

When Ginger asked the smocked vet tech behind the counter for our dogs, the young woman’s smile froze. She excused herself to find the vet. We waited, too long it seemed, twitching at muffled barks and yelps emerging from behind the half-dozen examining room doors. Finally, the vet, file folder in hand, appeared down the hall. Behind him yowled Bitey, who dragged the vet tech past the doctor, Ginger and me on his way to the exit. I took the leash, wrapped it around my wrist, and, yanked with a firm, “Down, Bitey! Quiet!” while the dog belly-swam over the slick tiles.

“Exuberant,” I grunted over his whimpering. “He’s glad to be free.”

Ginger shot me an inquisitive look—where was Barky, our good dog? The vet frowned over his glasses without settling his gaze on either of us. “I’m sorry to have to tell you, but Bark passed away yesterday morning.” The air felt suddenly thinner, unbreathable.

“What?” Ginger asked in disbelief. “Barky?” She looked past the doctor at the vet tech, who lifted her hands like they needed washing and stepped behind the counter.

“Gastric Dilatation Volvulus,” the vet said, “Commonly known as ‘bloat.’ Difficult to pinpoint the cause—the intestines become twisted up sometimes when the animal is overexcited. The blood supply gets cut off to important organs, and, well—” His voice trailed off. “We can do an autopsy if you like. I caution you, it’s expensive.” He cleared his throat and looked at the folder he held, which I assumed was Barky’s medical record. “We’re so sorry. It’s one of those freak occurrences. We didn’t call you because it’s our policy to deliver this kind of news in person.”

Everything happened so fast. Still dazed by the news, we declined the autopsy. No, we didn’t want to see Barky’s body, which was in the freezer. The doctor shook Ginger’s hand, and I gave him a sober nod. He took a deep breath, expanding and deflating like a vertical accordion, and turned to leave. Ginger stopped him with a question.

“What kinds of animals get ‘bloat?’ Just dogs?”

The vet blinked and resettled his glasses. “It’s also common in cattle. All ruminants, actually.”
“Ruminants? What other kinds of ruminants are there? Cats?” Ginger’s words smoked like dry ice.


“Bambi?” Ginger folded her arms. “Bambi was a ruminant? Did Bambi’s mother die of bloat? Oh—wait—it was ‘man’ who killed her, wasn’t it?”

The doctor, vaguely aware of an accusation, tucked his folder under his arm, bowed slightly, and retreated down the hall. Just as he passed the nearest examining room, its door swung open, and a tiny white poodle pranced out, followed by a large man in an orange track suit. Bitey stiffened beside me, barking sharply. “Quiet!” I warned and tightened my grip on his leash, while the poodle’s owner whisked his dog from the floor and clutched it to his chest.

“Sorry,” I shrugged and pivoted to Ginger, who was deep in discussion with the vet tech. The young woman held what I realized with a pang was Barky’s collar, which she was sliding through her fingers, jingling the silver tags. Ginger turned to me with misty eyes.

“How do we want Barky’s ashes? It’s fifty for mixed.”

Bitey lay across my feet, his low growl simmering. “Shh,” I soothed. He was waiting, I knew, for another crack at the poodle, whose owner lingered behind me.

“What’s ‘mixed’ mean?” I asked. “Barky was a mix. Some kind of lab-hound.”

Ginger shook her head. “She says ‘mixed’ is a scoop from all the day’s ashes. For just Barky it would be—two hundred more?” The vet tech nodded to confirm the price and offered the collar, which Ginger ignored.

I glanced down at Bitey. Did he sense his companion’s fate? Truth be told, the two dogs barely got along. We walked and fed them separately—when it was Barky’s turn for dinner, we had to lock Bitey in our bedroom. The pair had looked a bit like twins when we’d picked them out of the puppy pen at the shelter. But gentle Barky had developed into a handsome, sturdy almost-lab, while ill-tempered Bitey had turned into something more like a coyote with measles. (“Is he sick? These will go away, right?” Ginger asked of the rash of spots that eventually marked Bitey’s hide.) His floppy ears rose and stiffened like a kangaroo’s
in spite of Ginger’s effort to pat them back down whenever he didn’t shy away from her hand. “Bitey’s never actually bitten any one,” was the highest compliment we’d ever paid him.

“Do we really need any ashes?” I grunted as I tried to hide the effort it took to keep Bitey from lurching toward the poodle. After a sharp jerk, he melted back to the floor with a groan. “Where would we put them? We don’t have a fireplace or a mantle.”

Ginger winced down at Bitey as if seeing him for the first time. Was she wondering, like I was, if fate had taken the wrong dog? We’d accepted the chaff with the wheat, but now the wheat was gone. Were we a family without Barky? Could Bitey alone claim our hearts? As I contemplated our surviving dog’s role in our future life, the shadow of the decision Ginger and I had been unable to resolve in Barbados fell over me.

Ginger turned back to the vet tech. She finally noticed Barky’s collar, snatched it, and handed over a credit card. “No ashes,” she said.

“If you change your mind,” the vet tech said as she processed our payment, “you’ll have to call within the hour for the individual ashes. For the mixed tell us before five o’clock.” She handed Ginger a tissue while she waited for the receipt to print. “We took half off of the boarding fee for, you know, the other one.”

“Half off for killing our dog? A bargain.” Ginger crushed the tissue, tossed it into a nearby trashcan, and spun away. “Good luck with your bloat,” she called over her shoulder, and strode toward the exit. The poodle man gave her a wide berth. Bitey had snapped at the flight of the tissue, but now, forepaws clawing at the air, he galloped after his departing mistress. I was dragged past the poodle guy, who said something like, “Why don’t you train your dog, Horatio?” Before I could respond, Bitey had pulled me through the door.

On the short drive to our apartment, Bitey careened about the car, back seats and front, howling at passersby, smudging the windows with his saliva. Shoving Bitey off our laps occupied all our attention, and it was impossible for Ginger and me to share our grief over Barky’s loss. We found a parking space in front of our building, and Ginger rolled our suitcases to the entrance while I paraded Bitey around the tiny square of dirt surrounding the only tree on our block. He pissed and shat on command, his only talent. I searched my pockets.
“Got a bag?” I called to Ginger, who waited at the door. She patted herself down half-heartedly.

“Nope. These are still my Barbados clothes.”

After a quick peek up and down the street, I toed the turd into the gutter and scraped my shoe on the curb.

Inside our apartment, Ginger and I flopped together onto the sofa, both of us too wrung out emotionally and physically to unpack. The television remote on the chair across the room seemed a thousand miles away, and I stared at a blank screen. Bitey settled on his bed beneath the TV, his snout on his crossed paws. He seemed to be gazing at the empty bed beside him.

“Poor Barky,” I sighed. I closed my eyes and let my head drop to the back of the sofa. Ginger mumbled something in reply. I didn't reach out to her. Six weeks, she'd said when she told me. What do we want to do? There’d never been an adequate explanation of how such a thing could happen. In between, she’d said, flushing with an expression I at first mistook for an apology. Nothing else besides that “in between”—had the miscalculation been physical? Temporal? If there had been a miscalculation at all. So, Barbados. And back, with nothing to show but lost time and a dead dog.

“Bitey’s looking for Barky,” Ginger murmured. “Maybe we should have paid for the ashes, at least the mixed ones.”

“So we'd be spending fifty dollars on a box of cinders that’s mostly other people’s dogs? Or maybe not even dogs—who knows what else died there today? You want rat ashes? An urn full of snake dust? And then what? Bitey would knock it over and we’d have to vacuum up the mess anyway.”

Though we weren’t touching, I felt Ginger’s shudder—she hated snakes. “Sorry,” I said. “It’s just that it’s a waste. Maybe instead we’ll blow up a photo of him. Or have someone do an oil painting.”

“A painting of Barky and Bitey?”

I looked at Bitey, draped across his bed. “Why include him? He’s still here. Besides, it wouldn’t be honest to put them together—they weren’t really friends.” I spoke to Bitey in my “good dog” voice: “We’ll wait until you’re gone to get a picture of you,” I said, and he looked at me. “Maybe we’ll stuff you, or better yet get a statue, like the one of Balto in Central Park.” I turned to Ginger. “In Russia there’s a statue of Pavlov with one of his dogs. I saw a
picture of it once. Maybe close up you can see drool chiseled on Pavlov’s lap. Come to think of it, Bitey, you’ll probably live so long, people will be getting holograms of their dead dogs instead of ashes. When I’m ninety, I’ll have to walk your hologram so it can shit little hologram turds.”

“Just stop.” Ginger picked up her laptop from the end table. “This is—something sad. We’re supposed to be sad.” She opened her computer.

I sat for a while listening to her tap on her keyboard. I tried to think about Barky, but I couldn’t summon any feelings that felt appropriate. I peeked at Ginger through half-closed lids and wondered if this would be a good time for us to bare our feelings about our “situation.” Instead, I decided to mention the thing that had been nagging at me since we’d left the vet’s office.

“Hey—remember the guy with the poodle—the big guy wearing orange—back at the vet’s?”

Ginger didn’t look away from the laptop. “Not really. I was too upset—I just wanted to get out of there.”

“He said something to me while I was following you out. He said, ‘Why don’t you train your dog, Horatio?’”

Ginger glanced at me, then at Bitey. “He’s right. Why don’t you?”

“He called me ‘Horatio.’”

“Is that a thing? Something from hip-hop? I don’t know, I’m out of touch.” She blinked back at her laptop screen. “How do you spell ‘bloat’? The regular way, or is there a special medical—?” She typed and scrolled. “Never mind, I got it.”

Across from us, Bitey had stood. He stared at the front door with eerily translucent eyes. The hair along his spine rose. For a good ten seconds he remained frozen, mesmerized by nothing apparent. Then the spell broke, he turned around once and lay down as if his attention had never been roused.

Ginger finished reading about bloat. “Poor Barky,” she sighed with a frown. Then she remembered what I’d just told her. “Some stranger called you ‘Horatio’?”

“I think maybe he wasn’t a complete stranger,” I said. “I was dealing with Bitey and never got a good look at him. But I think he might have been someone I used to know back in high school.
‘Horatio’ came from *Hamlet*. If it’s who I think it was, we were in the play together. He got fat.”

“You were in *Hamlet*? You never told me that. You were Horatio? That’s impressive.”

“It kind of sucks, actually. I was never Horatio. I auditioned for Horatio, but I didn’t get the part. I was the ‘Messenger from England.’ At the end I got to say, ‘Rosencrantz and Guilderstern are dead.’ Not much else. Nobody—guards, servants, all the walk-ons—had fewer lines than the Messenger from England. Girls playing guys had bigger parts than mine.”

“Then why did your friend—the poodle man—call you Horatio?”

“Because he was a schmuck. He knew it bothered me and thought it was funny. And he was *Hamlet*, of course. And the other member of our threesome, this nasty guy Roger, he was Polonius. It might have been Roger who started calling me Horatio.”

Ginger shut her laptop. For the first time since we got home, I had her full attention. “That’s mean, rubbing it in. They were your friends?”

“Supposedly. Jerry Convenience. That was *Hamlet*’s—the poodle guy’s—name. Roger and Jerry—the two of them were especially tight. Inseparable.” In my mind’s eye I was trying to superimpose the face of Jerry Convenience on the guy at the vet’s.

“That’s a strange name, ‘Convenience.’ It sounds like a joke.”

“I nicknamed him ‘Seven,’ after the 7-11 convenience shops. He said that an ‘immigrant forbearer’—that was the way he talked—an ‘immigrant forbearer’ picked the name ‘Convenience’ out of a dictionary because it resembled the family name from the old country.”

A flurry across the room grabbed our attention—Bitey was sitting up, scratching his muzzle with a back paw.

“He’s itchy,” Ginger said. “And lonely.”

“I should have let him bite Jerry Convenience.”

“If you knew each other, wouldn’t he have said more to you at the vet’s than just calling you Horatio?”
“No. By the time we graduated, I wasn’t even on speaking terms with him or Roger. They hated me. And the amazing thing is, the next time I saw them, they tried to kill me.”

“Kill you?”

“Murder me, yeah.” I leaned my head back and stared up at the ceiling. My eyes ran along a crack I’d never noticed before, a thin line that had been painted over. It ran nearly the length of the room. I didn’t even know it then. I figured it out a just couple of months ago, after, like, fifteen years. It just popped into my head—an epiphany.”

“You had an epiphany about a murder plot?”

“When I went for my root canal. I sat in the chair, all numbed up. Dr. Stein was doing his thing inside my mouth, and I let my attention drift up to all those pictures they’ve taped on the ceiling to give the patients something relaxing to look at.”

“The postcards and travel brochures—”

“Right—the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, the Coliseum, ski resorts. And beautiful beaches—like the ones in the Bahamas—golden sands, palm trees, blue ocean. So you can take a vacation in your mind while Dr. Stein’s earning his living inside your mouth.”

“Wait—but why did your friends start to hate you. What did you do?”

A sharp whimper interrupted. Bitey’s scratching had gotten violent. “Hey, boy, what’s the matter?” Ginger called. She set her lap top aside, pushed herself off the couch, and went to examine the dog. “Eew—his eye is all crusty. I bet he caught something at the vets. Yuch—” She hurried into the kitchen and returned with a damp paper towel folded into a square. But when she tried to wipe Bitey’s eye, he growled and jerked his head away.

“Don’t lose a finger,” I cautioned.

Ginger sing-songed our Bitey mantra: “He’s never actually bitten anyone.” She stood with her hands on her hips and gazed down ruefully at the dog, who continued to scratch. She dabbed at her temples with the towel and returned to the couch. “Dried crap all over his eyes,” she muttered and flipped open her laptop. “They kill one dog, infect the other. Now I’ve got to look up ‘crusty eyes.’” She blinked at the screen, then shot me a look. “Did you say why your friends hated you enough to want to
kill you? I forget. Sorry, I’m a little distracted. I saw Barky’s bowl in the kitchen.”

“His bowl? Damn.” I stayed silent for a respectful few seconds before returning to my story. “You know why those guys hated me? Because I got Jerry back for the Horatio thing. He asked me to write him a peer recommendation for college. For Dartmouth. He couldn’t ask Roger, because Roger had already gotten in there, early decision with a recommendation from Jerry, and a tit for tat was against the rules. I guess I used the letter as retaliation—for ‘Horatio.’ Maybe for some other slights. Maybe I was just jealous.”

Ginger lifted an eyebrow. “What did you write?”

“Wise-ass stuff I thought was clever— like, where they asked if the candidate was flexible, I wrote, ‘Jerry’s tendency to vacillate is legendary.’ And he got rejected. Didn’t even make the waitlist.”

“Because of your letter, you think?”

“Who knows? Maybe. But Jerry must have figured out somehow that I screwed him because after the rejection he and Roger cut me off cold. Walked by me in the halls like I was a ghost. Overnight, the whole school treated me like I’d ruined Jerry Convenience’s life. Even teachers who’d liked me for years treated me like shit. Graduation couldn’t come soon enough.” I wiped my brow, surprised to find I was sweating.

Ginger was looking at me the same way she’d looked at the veterinarian when he told us of Barky’s death. “So did you feel like you got even? Do you feel it?”

I shrugged. “Jerry got a scholarship to some little college down South. He must have done okay. He can afford to live in this city. He’s got a dog, just like us. And how do I know his life isn’t better than if he’d gotten into his first-choice college?”

Ginger’s lashes fluttered. Her upper lip curled. “You’re saying maybe he would have died in a car crash up in New Hampshire? Or maybe he met his future wife at the college down South?” She sighed and turned back to her laptop. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. She typed something, then sat back and looked at me mournfully. “And the murder? You said you had an ‘epiphany’ about it.”

“In the dentist’s office, yeah.” My words felt
heavy in my mouth, like stones. “One of those pictures on the ceiling—a surfer on a monster wave made me think of Seven.”

“Seven. Jerry Convenience. He surfed?”

“Not that I knew. Not in high school. We were all indoor boys. After high school, I thought he and Roger had washed their hands of me forever, and vice-versa. But then came spring break senior year of college. Remember—you went down to Florida with your sorority friends, and I spent the week at home—at my parents’. Then out of the blue I got a phone call from Jerry Convenience.”

“Daytona. We slept on the beach.”

“Yeah, I know, you came back all sun-burned. You didn’t want me to touch you. I thought we were breaking up. I thought you met somebody down there. An outdoor boy, maybe.”

Ginger gazed at her laptop screen with narrowed eyes. The tips of her ears glowed red. “And what about the phone call from Jerry Convenience?”

“It was weird. He did the ‘how’s-it-going-long-time-no-see’ thing, as if there hadn’t been a rift between us. Then he invited me to go surfing with him and Roger. I said sure.”

Ginger lifted a shoulder to rub her chin. Our eyes met, and she looked away. “But you don’t do the ocean. You don’t go in it, anyway. ‘The surface is impenetrable,’ you always say.

“Damn right. But I guess I was bored. I was tired of organizing my vacation days around The Price is Right.”

Across the room, Bitey groaned. He lay on his side now, but still dug at his eye with a forepaw. Ginger clucked her tongue.

“I’ve been looking it up—it says here he might have something called ‘dry-eye.’ Not uncommon. We can treat it with warm compresses and ointment.”

“If we can get close enough.”

“If. So—you went surfing? It’s hard to believe we knew each other when all of this was happening. It’s like I’m listening to a different person’s life.”

“I’m telling you now. Jerry and Roger picked me up. They barely made eye contact when I got in the car. They looked more like a pair of morticians than surfers.”
“You didn’t care that they hated you?”

“I guess since Jerry hadn’t mentioned it, I thought maybe they forgot.”

Ginger sniffed. “People don’t forget things.” She sat up straight and folded her arms. “You know what? I decided I do want Barky’s ashes. I don’t care if they’re mixed. You still have time to get to the vet’s before five o’clock.”

“Really? For fifty dollars?” I shrug. “Fine. I’ll go back. While I’m there I’ll ask if that poodle guy really was Jerry Convenience.”

“You can pick up some ointment, too, for Bitey’s eyes. I’ll call when you leave so they’ll have it ready.”

“Okay. So—the murder: Jerry drove his family’s station wagon, and I sat in the back behind him and Roger. I leaned on a purple surfboard that stuck out the rear hatch like the tongue of somebody choking to death.”

“You thought that then?”

“That’s how I picture it now. We drove for miles in complete silence. We were headed toward the south shore of Long Island, to the beaches where people surf. The awkwardness was so thick my skin felt sticky with it. So, I started mocking them.”

“You mocked them?”

“Reflex, I suppose. Repartee, what friends do. If I’d realized that they were planning to kill me, I probably would have been trying to figure out how to escape. But at the time I missed all the clues. ‘Seven?’ I said, ‘you’re way less than that. Not even six. Or three or two. You’re not even zero. You’re ever diminishing nothingness. King Minus, and your touch creates a void. What you are,’ I said, ‘is Unfinite. Unfinity is your new name. And you,’ I said to that grim bastard, Roger, ‘are Unfunity.’”

“Unfinity and Unfunity.”

“Nice, right? Since my epiphany at the dentist’s, I think about the scenario all the time. I take it apart and put it back together. Everything about that ride comes back to me as if I’m watching a movie: I see the interior of the station wagon, and that surfboard—the big purple tongue. And here’s the scary thing—there’s a thick rope and a burlap bag and a metal pipe. Oh, and I’m pretty sure there’s an ax.”
“An ax?”

“I see them with the other stuff stored behind me under the surfboard. And all the time there are signs we’re getting closer and closer to the beach—marsh grass, sea gulls, sand, the salt smell.” I closed my eyes and saw my would-be assailant: Jerry Convenience choked the steering wheel with a white knuckled grip, absorbing my insults and trading glances with Roger. What were they imagining? A purple surfboard dipping and spinning over a dark wave? A rope strung with seaweed? A sinking burlap bag loaded with something that had the unmistakable heft of a body?

Another yelp from Bitey broke the spell. He was rubbing his muzzle frantically on his pillow.

“Oh—he’s miserable. You better hurry to the vet.” Ginger pushed her laptop to her knees and placed a hand on her abdomen; with a jolt, I realized that there was something growing inside her.

“Barky’s ashes and Bitey’s ointment. They owe us,” I said, looking at her stomach.

“And see whether or not the guy who called you Horatio is your Jerry Convenience. I just googled him. There’s a million entries for ‘Jerry’s Convenience Store,’ but nothing for just ‘Jerry Convenience.’ Didn’t you ever stalk him—even after you figured out about your murder? I bet his ears are burning now. Aren’t you curious?” Her voice got spooky and mysterious—was she teasing me? “Maybe he’s been stalking you. Maybe he’s been waiting all these years to finish you off.”

But Ginger wasn’t wearing the look of a teaser. Her unsmiling face tilted up at me, as if she was sniffing for something, and there were shadows under her puffy eyes. Did she sense from the story of my imagined murder the possibility of an “or” life she might have lived without me? Just how attractive was that alternative?

“I poked around a little. Nothing but those ‘Jerry’s Convenience Stores’ you found.” I felt hollowed out, as if my insides had turned to dust.

“Hm,” Ginger closed her eyes. Her lids looked bruised. “So—what happened? How did it end?”

“I survived,” I said, worried she’d be disappointed, in spite of the fact that my presence belied any other conclusion. “Nothing happened. It started to rain—it turned out to be a lousy day for the beach.
We turned around.”

“And you kept mocking them?”

“No—I got carsick.” The emptiness I felt gave way to nausea as I relived that drive home—the beat of the windshield wipers, the smell of the upholstery, the pair of heads in the front seats, as still as mannequins.

“Kind of anticlimactic.”

“Yeah.” I stood up, wobbly. I could have told more. Ginger’s look reminded me of the contempt on Roger’s rain-speckled face when I saw it through his window after getting out of the car. It was pouring by then. I was drenched before I got to my front porch.

“You okay?” Ginger asked. “You look pale. I can go back to the vet’s, if you want.”

“I got this. It’s the least I can do,” I added as I made my way, light-headed and stomach-sick, to the door. My eyes fell on Barky’s bed. I tried to imagine my own absence—of shrinking away until there was nothing left of me. But I couldn’t get myself out of the picture—I felt I would always be there, but everything around me would disappear, until I was surrounded by nothingness. Bitey got up and followed me to the door.

“I bet he thinks you’re going to get Barky,” Ginger said.

“I am,” I said. I reached for Bitey’s head. He didn’t pull away. His eyes were crusted. He let me brush some of the crud away with my thumb. “I better hurry with his ointment—he’s drying up. He’s the opposite of Pavlov’s drooly dog.”

“Watch out for Jerry Convenience. That’s some story.”

Watch out for how long? I thought. For the rest of my life? “Some story,” I echoed, my hand on the knob. I pushed Bitey back with my leg to keep him from following me out the door. “Not the kind we’ll tell our kids. Not at bedtime anyway.”

“What?” Ginger called sharply as the door shut behind me. I paused in the hall, listening to see if she would repeat herself, not knowing if I’d hear her.
leaves lie dreaming
in the grass and across
the street, brushing
broken bottles, colors
mute in morning light.

west wind cuts among them,
cold whispers taunt:
what once was.
they turn and twist
but will not wake--
a season of sleep,
a time to die.

crow on a wire calls
a hole into the horizon.
a chill across my jacket.
what will the wind
tell me?
Before an Ebbing ~
  Fritz Eifrig

we were young and high, climbing
beneath a cavern of stars,
dune crest and its scrub brushing
feet and fingertips.

we sat and watched the fishermen
work for smelt, heavy rubber waders
sounding through the breakers,
slow work of nets glittering
full of scales and hooks.

a rising stillness wrapped our heads
and muffled time’s insistence,
yet all around us endless motion,
the tone of eons thrumming
from deep below and back again,
little bubbling secrets rushing out
across the dark wet sand.

that was summer’s dawning,
witness to a subtle tide,
under slow curves of moonlight,
the shapes of our faces
looking east.
Author Bios ~

Fritz Eifrig has been writing poems on and off for 40 years. His work has appeared in *Poetry Quarterly*, *Foxglove Journal*, the *Bookends Review*, and the *Hiram Poetry Review*. He lives and works in Chicago, Illinois. His works in this journal were originally published in *Scarlet Leaf Review*.

Jeff Ewing’s poems, stories, and essays have appeared in *ZYZZYVA*, *Willow Springs*, *Sugar House Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Saint Ann’s Review*, and *Lake Effect*, among others. He lives in Sacramento, California with his wife and daughter.

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over thirteen hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for numerous prizes, and was awarded the 2017 Booranga Writers’ Centre (Australia) Prize for Fiction. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. He lives in Denver, Colorado.

Gillian Haines is an Australian who lives in Tucson’s desert. She writes about experiences that shaped her: migration, volunteering to visit four men in in maximum-security prison, and family life following her husband’s brain injury. Living in a place where saguaros bloom beside parched riverbeds has helped her recognize more than the desert’s thirst. One of her essays was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Literary magazines that have published or accepted her work include *The Santa Clara Review*, *Bridge Eight*, *The Cherry Tree*, *Solstice*, and *Flying South*.

Zebulon Huset is a writer and photographer living in San Diego. His writing has recently appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Meridian*, *North American Review*, *The Cortland Review*, *The Portland Review*, *The Maine Review* and *The Roanoke Review* among others. He received his MFA from the University of Washington where he served as the assistant editor at *The Seattle Review*. He publishes a writing prompt blog (Notebooking Daily) and his flash fiction submission guide was reposted at *The Review Review*.

McKenzie Hyde received her Master of Arts in Literature and Writing at Utah State University. Her thesis, a poetry collection, focused on the different voices a speaker uses in their poems and how those voices can be at odds with each other.
Hart L’Ecuyer is a surrealist poet from St. Louis. These are the pages.

Sean Madden is an analyst at the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. His story, “How the Lonesome Engine Drivers Pine,” was a finalist for Alternating Current Press’s 2018 Luminaire Award for Best Prose. He is also a co-recipient of the 4th Annual John Updike Review Emerging Writers Prize. His stories have appeared, or are forthcoming, in The Los Angeles Review, Dappled Things, and Umbrella Factory. He holds an MFA from the University of Kentucky, and lives in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada with his wife and sons. Visit him at seanmadden.org.

R.F. McEwen is a poet and veteran tree-trimmer who lives in Chadron, Nebraska. He’s published three books, Heartwood & Other Poems, Casey Jo MacBride’s White River, Vol. 1, and his newly-released book, And There’s Been Talk.... His poetry has been published in numerous journals including Belfast’s Yellow Nib.

Maddie Murphy is a textile artist, journalist, creative writer, and fashion designer based in Kansas City, Missouri. She graduates from the Kansas City Art Institute in May with her BFA in Fiber and Creative Writing. Murphy interned at the Saint Louis Fashion Fund in 2017, specializing in fashion journalism and public relations, and is a staff writer at Informality Blog, an arts and culture publication. In her writing and visual work, she explores the depth and variety of human emotions as it relates to her spirituality and supportive communities. Much of Murphy’s work demonstrates transitions between states. Maddie Murphy believes the highest purpose of our finite lives is the way we connect with those around us, seeking to leave the world a little better than we found it.

A native of Lviv, in Western Ukraine, Nina Murray is a poet and translator. Her poems have appeared in Cosmotaunts’ Avenue, Figroot Press, Ekphrasis, Lumina, The Cleaver Magazine and other publications. Her chapbook Minimize Considered is published by Finishing Line Press. As a U.S. diplomat, she has served in Lithuania, Canada, and Russia.

Bianca Phipps is an actor, poet, and teaching artist currently based in Chicago. She is most interested in finding the glory in minute details. Her work can be found in Heavy Feather Review and on Button Poetry. When she isn’t writing, she is trying to eat too much bread and asking strangers if she can pet
their dogs.

Robert Rickelman earned his BA in Spanish at the University of Arizona, which is where he was introduced and deeply affected by the wonderful Latin American genre of Magical Realism. He employs this in most of his writing.

Marina Rubin’s work had appeared in over seventy magazines and anthologies including 13th Warrior Review, Asheville Poetry Review, Dos Passos Review, 5AM, Nano Fiction, Coal City, Green Hills Literary Lantern, Jewish Currents, Lilith, Pearl, Poet Lore, Skidrow Penthouse, The Worcester Review, and many more. She is an editor of Mudfish, the Tribeca literary and art magazine. She is a 2013 recipient of the COJECO Blueprint Fellowship. Her fourth book, a collection of flash fiction Stealing Cherries was released in November 2013 to rave reviews. “...One of the richer contemporary visions of America that I’ve read,” said NANO Fiction. “Marina Rubin’s collection of micro-stories hits all the right notes with its humor, warmth and mild perversity,” said Coachella Valley Independent. And Urban Graffiti declared: “its intimate clash of cultures, political and economic antagonisms, and transgressive sexualities are never very far from the surface of these sometimes nostalgic, sometimes bittersweet, often sensual fictions…”

Alyssa Striplin was born and raised in the Kansas City, Missouri suburbs. She is an MFA graduate from Minnesota State University, Mankato, and has had her work published in The Molotov Cocktail, BULL, and has a story on the way in Midwestern Gothic. She can be found liking too many posts about monsters on Twitter @adstriplin.